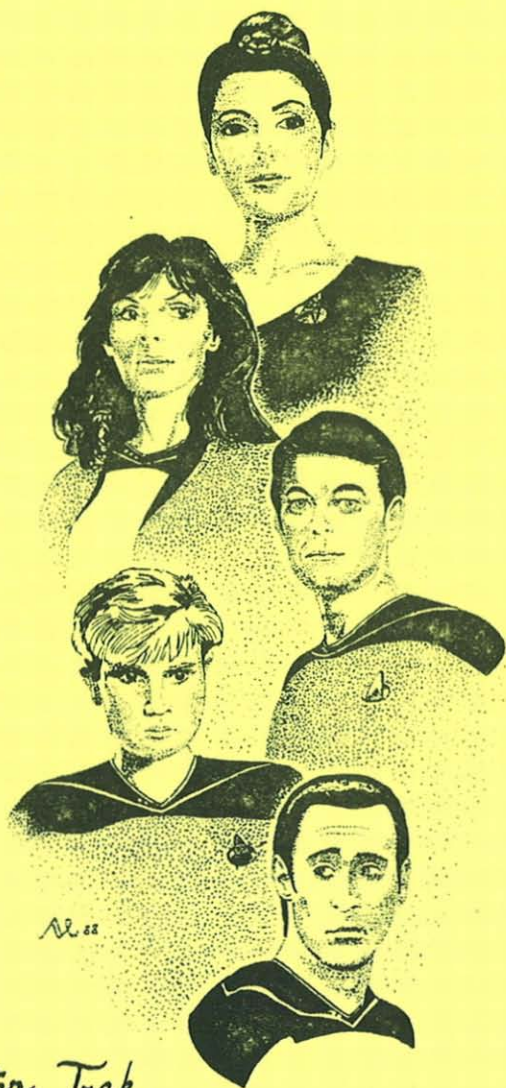


ShoTpress

MAKE IT SO 15



*a Star Trek
fanzine*

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WARRIORS

by

Gail Christison

"Ah, Worf... We are so much alike, you and I; both warriors... Orphans who found ourselves this family..."

Worf stepped into the turbolift nearest his quarters. "Holodeck three," he told the computer absently, his thoughts immersed in the events of the previous day. So much had happened since Kazinski and the Traveller had beamed aboard the Enterprise...

The Holodeck was in use. He snorted. It was scheduled for his use. The computer informed him that Tasha Yar was inside.

"Enter," he growled.

Tasha was waiting for him. "Worf," she huffed, bent over, trying to catch her breath. "Computer, freeze program," she ordered, and grinned at him. "I took you up on your offer."

"And you have succeeded?"

"Well... I've only been killed once, so far," she said ruefully.

"Computer," he commanded, "level two. Resume."

They moved through Worf's calisthenics programme, climbing through the dense Klingon undergrowth of an Empire world, alert to every noise, every scent, the tiniest movement.

It was eerily quiet; only the recorded sounds of birds, animals and insects punctuated the silence.

Worf growled low in his throat.

The hairs on the back of Tasha's neck stood up. There was an unearthly, howling shriek. The undergrowth exploded with the bodies of several fully grown zhor'ghn. The leader repeated the sound that set Tasha's teeth on edge.

It was about six feet high, upright. Small sharp ears were laid back against a head covered in the same rough whorled orange and black coat as the rest of its massive, muscled body. Tasha found it impossible to liken it to any Terran animal. Perhaps more than anything similar to the hyena, it caused the same unnerving sense of fear and revulsion.

They started to circle, mouths perpetually open, saliva foam fouling the powerful jaws full of jagged, uneven teeth.

Tasha took a deep breath, her skin crawling with surging adrenalin and her heart thumping in her breast. It felt like another time. It felt like yesterday... They were surrounded, the forest shadows like the dreaded twilight of her home world when the rape

gangs began to move. Worf growled again. This time Tasha's eyes went to his face. It was a bestial, challenging growl. Worf's eyes burned into the creature's mesmerized yellow ones. All of the Klingon's predatory soul was in that look, the challenge of the pack leader.

Several of the other creatures dropped to all fours, cowering in the presence of another alpha male, but the leader and the other nearest him moved forward, galvanizing the pack into action.

The two Enterprise Security Officers moved back to back, Klingon ceremonial weapons glinting in the artificial light, just as Worf's eyes glinted as he met his opposite in battle.

Yar was aware of the ferocity of their struggle, as they clashed, claws, teeth, blade all inflicting grievous harm. The circle was closing. The others dare not interfere with the leader's kill, but Tasha was now a lone target.

Using the fighters as cover, she circled around them, keeping them between herself and the pack. One split off and circled the other way.

It leaped. Yar thrust her blade high in the air and triggered the side blades as it took her. They rolled in the leaves, Tasha's back slashed by flailing claws as she came up. The others were waiting, close. Instinctively she looked for Worf and was caught a massive blow on the side of the head by a huge, flailing paw that sent her sprawling. Pumped full of adrenalin she sprang back up, her head ringing, the pain barely acknowledged, and faced her attacker. And heard the final, rattling breath of the creature, apparently neatly impaled on the deadly, razor sharp dagger when it first leaped on her. She whirled around to face the other beasts but they had slunk away.

Worf.

The giant zhor'ghn lay, gored and bloody, over the inert form of the Klingon, its violent shudders all the more horrifying for the great knife protruding from its left eye.

The remaining creatures wailed distressingly from somewhere in the forest as she moved to Worf's side.

"Computer, end program!" she commanded.

They made a lonely pair against the distinctive grid pattern in the great, empty room.

"Worf!" Tasha knelt at his head, her fingers searching for serious wounds, even as her anger rose at the possibility of another computer malfunction. With difficulty she turned him onto his side. Well, the scratches were gone and so was the blood. No malfunction. She moved her own shoulders and felt nothing. Her head had not fared as well. The paw was solid matter when it hit her, and the computer had not assessed the potential of the blow as damaging.

Tasha scowled and laid the Klingon back down again. He was impressive, even in repose. She should call medical. Should. Worf would kill her!

"C'mon Worf, wake up, or I'll have to get Medical," she said aloud, lifting his head onto her lap. Then she felt it. A lump the size of a hen's egg. She clamped down on a giggle. Worf had hit his head on the deck and knocked himself out!

She watched the slow rise and fall of his chest for a few long seconds, trying to decide

what to do, her hand resting on the side of his throat where his pulse was strongest.

He stirred. Yar's fingers moved to pick leaves from his hair. His eyes opened.

"How do you feel?"

Worf stared up at her. "I was defeated?" he said incredulously.

Tasha shook her head. "It was dead, your weapon in its eye. The others ran."

He closed his eyes again and sighed. After a beat he opened them again. "You were not afraid?"

"Terrified." She brushed moss and dirt from his cheeks. "It reminded me of home," she said absently, thinking of the image of her old cat from the previous day.

"Yesterday I was reminded of a place that was my home when I was very small," he said slowly. "But I have always considered Galt to be home and when the Roshenkos move back to Earth shortly... I will call that home."

It was the longest personal speech Yar had ever heard Worf make. He was looking at her keenly, unmoved, from his prone position.

Tasha nodded, understanding. "This is home," she said softly. "I don't want any other."

"Good," he rumbled, and rose slowly to his feet. "You will not have nightmares tonight," he told her and extended his hand.

She took it and came to her feet as gracefully as a gazelle.

"Thanks." Her eyes found his and watched for the answering gleam.

"You're welcome," he said gruffly, but it was there. Tasha smiled back. It was enough.

"Lunch?" she inquired.

"Who's buying?" Worf gave no indication that the expression, commonly used among junior crew as a running joke, was intended to be humorous. Which, perversely, made Tasha laugh all the more.

She linked an arm easily through his massive one as they walked to the exit.

"I have to start training soon for the martial arts competition. I'll need a training partner," she told the Klingon as he called for the exit.

"Why?" Worf said as the door appeared and slid open. "You already have one."

She looked up at him as he automatically reclaimed his arm, pure affection in her expression.

"Of course. I stand corrected," she grinned.

They turned together for the rec deck, and lunch.



BEHIND THE TEAR

You have stripped me of all
That makes me Human.
You have taken my honour,
My loyalty to Starfleet,
And made a mockery of it.
You have raped my memories,
And forced me to betray
All whom I love and admire.

And I cannot stop you.
You transform me into a puppet,
Dancing to your tune.
I hear the words - your words
Coming from my mouth.
It is my voice, my inflections.
But it is not me.

I am not Locutus of Borg.

You can use and abuse me.
You can take me apart
Piece by piece.
But I will fight you.
I know it is hopeless,
But I will fight every moment
That you bind me in this hell.

I will be Jean-Luc Picard once more.

Jenny Howsam



THE END

by

Lisa Dearnley-Davison

HISTORIAN'S NOTE: This adventure takes place some time after the events chronicled in the fourth-season Star Trek: The Next Generation episode "Remember Me".

Geordi awoke.

What a nightmare! It was so weird. A perfectly ordinary dream in a perfectly ordinary setting, and then... wham! Out pops that... that... whatever it was and takes me on that... whatever *that* was!

He swung his legs out of bed and reached for his VISOR.

Ouch. Damn thing. Still hurts when I put it on. That's better. It's easing a bit now. "Computer, time please."

"The time is currently oh-three hundred-twenty hours."

"Thanks, computer."

Time to go to work. Now, where's that razor? Data'll be here soon. Got to run a level four automated diagnostic series on the matter reactant injector first thing. I wonder what Sally's doing tonight? I've got a great new program to show her on the holodeck. Okay, what did I do with that clean uniform? It's around here someplace. Ah, yes. There it is. Where's Data? He's usually here by now. Maybe the Captain's got him doing something for the Ambassador's visit. Another ferrying job. Why don't they just get themselves some interstellar taxis instead of rerouting a Galaxy-class? Not that we've anything better to do. Should be about three-thirty now. My shift starts soon. I can't wait for Data any more. I'll just have to go and eat breakfast on my own.

The doors opened, and Geordi left his room.

It's very quiet this morning. Normally more people about. It is about three-thirty, mind you. Even so, there's a change of shift soon. Oh, well. My stomach is telling me to get a move on. Since Data's not here, I think I'll eat in Ten-Forward. Gosh hi to Guinan. See if she knows why there's no one about.

He entered the turbolift. "Ten-Forward."

The lift moved smoothly downward. It drew to a halt, and the doors opened.

Still no one about. What's going on? Did the Captain sound general quarters? Nah. I would've heard it. And the Red Alert would be flashing. So where is everyone? It's not my birthday, so there isn't a surprise party planned. Damn. If I don't get a move on, there won't be time for breakfast. Oh my God.

Geordi entered Ten-Forward to complete silence.

This isn't funny any more. Where is everyone? Why isn't there anyone here? Why am I alone? Where did everyone go?

"Where is everyone!"

Don't lose it. Be calm. There must be someone here. Try the bridge. There must be someone there. The ship can't fly itself. There're checks to be made.

Geordi exited Ten-Forward and re-entered the turbolift. "Bridge."

The warp drive adjustments to be done. The systems to be watched. They can't have all gone! Worf, Data, Deanna... There has to be someone. They wouldn't leave me alone. The engines are humming nicely. Quietly. Why's this turbolift taking so long?

The doors opened.

No! It can't be. They wouldn't. I mean... Where... What... This...

"Where did everyone go?"

"Please rephrase the question."

"Nothing. No, wait. Computer, where are the ship's crewmembers?"

"All ship's crewmembers are aboard."

"Are all the shuttles secure?"

"All shuttlecraft are secure."

"Computer, please locate Captain Picard."

"There is no Captain Picard listed on the ship's roster."

"What... I don't understand. You said everyone was here. Where are they? Why am I all alone?"

"I do not understand the question."

"Oh, shut up."

I don't understand. The computer said everyone was here, and yet Captain Picard isn't. Why did it lie? Is it as screwy as me? Is this another of Wesley's experiments gone wrong? Maybe I should try Engineering. The ship's moving. I should send out a distress signal and stop the ship.

"Computer, please stop all engines."

"All engines stopped."

"Where is the ship?"

"Coordinates eight-one-five by six-two-three by six-two-zero."

"Computer, please send out a distress signal."

"I am sorry. All subspace communications are inoperative."

"Damn, damn, damn!"

Geordi left the bridge.

Where can everyone be? What can I do? I can't run a starship by myself. I can't send out a distress signal. The computer's just as screwed up, and there's nothing... Wait a minute! Why didn't I think of that before?

"Computer, please launch a communications buoy containing our last position."

"Buoy launched."

"Computer, how long before the buoy reaches the nearest starbase?"

"Two point eight weeks."

"Oh, good grief!"

Okay, let's inspect the engines. Cold in here. No one here either. That's no surprise. Must check that injector. And keep calm. I have to keep sane until someone finds me. And keep the ship running. I've got to live off something. Brrr, it's so cold in here. Spooky, almost. Ha, hark at me. I'll be seeing ghosts before long. Let's have a look at this power transfer conduit. Seems okay to me. I suppose my date's off tonight. Oh, well.

The hours passed slowly. Geordi continued to work in Engineering.

I remember what Beverly said about what happened when she was left alone. It was a bit different, though. She said people kept disappearing. Everyone's gone here. She said the ship was disappearing too. It's all still here. It's just... It's just me.

"It's just me."

I'm cracking up. It's only been a few hours. Better get some sleep. All this silence is getting to me. I think I'll just sleep here. I'll get one of those emergency blankets out. That'll do.

Geordi fell into a restless sleep.

I'm all alone. Everyone's gone. Why did they leave me? What do I do? How can I run a ship on my own? The computer's on the blink. All the crew's here indeed! Where are they? Hiding in the engines?

Maybe.

"Who said that? There's no one here. No one spoke. I must've imagined it. There's no one here."

I am here.

"What? Who? I... I mean, where are you?"

Here.

"Yeah, but where? I can't see you? Never mind that. How come I can hear you in my

head. You have no voice? No substance?"

I must be hallucinating.

Yes, but I am here.

"That doesn't comfort me."

Should it?

"Well, it would be nice to know that I'm not alone."

But you can hear me.

"That's not good enough. I could be imagining it. I need proof."

Come over here.

"Where?"

Over by the computer console.

"Here? I can't see you. Your body heat doesn't register."

What body heat? I have no need of a body.

"Where are you? Show yourself. Brrr, it's gone cold."

Here!

"Argh! Keep away from me! Stay away from me, you monster! Leave me alone!"

Geordi stepped back and lost his balance as he tripped over the blanket. Then there was nothing, just the sensation of falling... falling... falling...

"Argh!"

Geordi jerked upright.

"Oh God, my head. Oh God, the monster!"

"Hey, you're okay, Geordi."

"Doctor?"

"Yes. Here's your VISOR."

"Beverly, is that really you?"

"Well, it was when I looked this morning."

"Everyone's here?"

"Of course. Did you think we'd all go off and leave you? With a nasty bump like that?"

"Ouch. How did I get this?"

"Data found you this morning. It looks like you fell out of bed and hit your head on the floor, knocking yourself unconscious."

"Oh. Must've been that nightmare."

"What was that?"

"I said it must've been a bad dream."

"Oh."

Just a dream. That's all it was. Nothing more. It was all just a dream.

Or was it?



K'EHLEYR'S POINT OF VIEW

I'm K'Ehleyr, I've been sent to help you
To find a solution, that's true.
And once we've surveyed all the options
I'm sure we will know what to do.



You say that you don't want to kill them
But this is a choice you must face.
For you have a ship full of Klingons
At war with the whole Human race.

You're thinking his ship you'll disable
But this is a choice that won't work.
For Klingons will never surrender
They simply engage self-destruct.



What happens now you've lost your chance?
They are cloaked, will we play hide and seek?
Let them die in battle with honour
Not the waste and the carnage they'll wreak.

Margaret Connor



TRUTH UNVEILED

by

Bonnie Holmyard

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Counselor Troi has suggested that the command crew spend the occasional evening together under circumstances other than those affiliated with duty in an attempt to combat the unacknowledged yet very real stress associated with command. The following is the third in a series of short stories depicting the command crew's informal get-togethers, told entirely from the point of view of this evening's host.

"There are seventy-eight cards in the Tarot deck," Counselor Deanna Troi explained, indicating the two rainbows of cards sprayed out in front of her on the silk covered table. "They are divided into two sets." One finely manicured finger pointed to the smaller arc of cards. "The Major Arcana, consisting of twenty-two cards and," her finger moved upward, "the Lesser Arcana, which numbers fifty-six." Around her sat the command crew, all of whom had gathered in her quarters in anticipation of her evening's entertainment. Seventy-eight candles, one for each Tarot card, were placed strategically around her lounging area. They provided the only light and, she hoped, added to the atmosphere of mysticism.

"The Lesser Arcana is divided into four suits," she explained, pulling a sample of each suit from the larger deck as she spoke their names. "Cups ... Pentacles ... Swords ... and Wands."

It had been Deanna's intention from the time she'd suggested these informal get-togethers to try her hand at the Tarot cards. The deck she was using was a family heirloom, passed to her from her father, just as they had been passed to him from his mother. She had happened upon them, some time ago and quite by accident, while going through one of her trunks. They had been wrapped in the shimmering blue silk that now served as the table's covering because, as legend stated, the cards were not allowed to touch any synthetic or man-made substance.

"Each suit denotes specific attributes," she said, "which I shall explain later. Each card," she held up two distinctly different cards, "bears its own individual image and tells its own story, but -" and here she paused - "behind each card there also lies what is called a divinatory meaning. One who is adept in the ways of the Tarot can speak of these hidden connotations, and, I must point out, the interpretations are precise and have not changed since the cards' inception."

As she spoke she watched those around her. Riker sat on her left. He was leaning back in his chair, arms crossed at chest level, an amused expression on his face. Next to him sat the Captain, whose eyes were on her, one eyebrow raised in intrigue. Data sat on Picard's left, interest written all over his pale features as he peered at the multi-coloured cards. Worf sat at attention, his expression one of candid indifference. Beverly and Geordi were quietly whispering, obviously about the cards. The overall mood was one of expectant amusement.

"The history of the Tarot cards can be traced back to Earth's 14th century," Deanna went on, poised and confident. "But some discrepancies arise as to their origins. Regardless of that, that they survive in this, the 24th century, speaks of their mystical powers. They are said to

have the abilities to predict the future, tell of the past, give insight into a person's character, speak of influences to be avoided or confronted; in other words, they provide a gateway to truth. You do not have to believe, but I would ask that you keep an open mind."

"Don't tell me you believe in this hocus-pocus!" Riker interrupted.

Deanna stared at him. "What I believe or do not believe is irrelevant," she answered. "It's up to each of you, individually, to accept the truth as stated by the cards, or to dismiss it."

"Let the lady talk, Commander," La Forge interrupted. "I, for one, find this fascinating."

"As do I," Data added.

"Thank you, gentlemen," Deanna said, and smiled an incandescent smile. Turning back to Riker, she said purposefully, "I sense the scepticism that surrounds me." Her eyes moved on. "But remember, the purpose of this evening is to entertain. We may laugh at what the cards reveal, or we may be surprised at their accuracy, but there's only one way to find out. Shall we begin?"

"Please do," Picard stated.

Deanna smiled again and began to gather the cards into two decks. "There are many ways to read the cards," she explained. "Tonight I shall employ the simplest. All other methods would take more time than our evening allows, especially as there are seven of us." She paused and met Riker's eyes once more. "As Commander Riker is the most cynical, I will start with him and work my way round the table to myself. Each of us will draw cards that will tell a little about ourselves."

There came smiles all round the table, Worf and Data excluded, but the biggest was Riker's. He leaned forward. "What do I have to do?" he asked.

"First I will shuffle each deck," she said as she picked up the smaller collection of cards, "simply because the cards are in order. Then you will do so, because the cards must get to know you."

Riker chuckled as she handed him the first deck. Deanna ignored him. "You will notice," she went on, directing her words to the others, "that I am keeping the two decks separate. This I do to accommodate the speed of the readings. We will each, in turn, pick one card from the Major Arcana, which should best reflect our personalities or the circumstances surrounding us at this precise moment. Then from the Lesser Arcana we will choose two cards, which should strengthen the first interpretation, or might delve into the unknown."

The shuffling process completed, Riker looked at Deanna expectantly. "Now what?" he questioned.

"First, cut the Major Arcana - being the smaller deck - three times and put it together in any way you please. Then do the same with the Lesser Arcana."

Riker did as instructed.

"Without looking at the cards, pull one from the Major Arcana and turn it face up in front of you."

Riker dramatically withdrew a card. Strength was its title. He grinned.

"Now take two cards from the Lesser Arcana."

The cards the First Officer revealed bore no titles, but at the top of each there appeared a Roman numeral.

This time it was Deanna who grinned. "Explanation time," she said, and reached for the card marked Strength. She held it up for all to see. "A woman over whose head broods the symbol of life is closing the jaws of a lion." She described the picture on the card. "Fortitude is one of this card's most exalted aspects: strength in might and the strength that lies in contemplation." She placed the card on top of its deck.

"You will note," she said indicating the two remaining cards in front of Riker, "that both cards come from the same suit, being Wands. The wands, or staffs, depicted on all cards in this suit are always in leaf." She paused. "It is the suit of life and animation. Will has chosen the seven and the nine." She picked up the seven.

"A young man on rocky ground brandishes his wand to six other wands that are raised toward him from below." Again, she described the picture. "This is a card of valour for, on the surface, six are attacking one who has the vantage point. On the intellectual plane it signifies tactful discussion." Again, she paused. "It is a card of success for the combatant," she concluded as she placed the card on top of its appropriate deck and then reached for the nine of Wands.

"On this card you see a man with a bandage on his head, leaning on his wand. He has already done battle with his enemy and survived, as the bandage testifies. His expectant look speaks of his awaiting the return of the enemy. Behind him stand the eight other wands, erect and ready for use. This card represents strength in opposition. When attacked, this person will meet the onslaught boldly. He is a formidable antagonist."

She placed the card on its deck and turned to face Riker. "Are you as pleased with your readings as your smile indicates, Will?" she asked.

"Pleased?" he said. "I'm impressed! Strength of body and mind, valour and success in combat, a formidable antagonist. What more could a man ask for?"

"Just plain luck, if you ask me," Geordi commented drily.

"Nobody asked, La Forge," Riker shot back, "and your turn will come."

"Captain," Deanna said and offered Picard both decks.

Picard went through the shuffling and cutting of the cards and then paused. He took the top card off the Major Arcana and flipped it over.

"Well, well!" Riker said, ignoring the pained look his words brought to the Captain's face. "What have we here?"

The Lovers stared up at Picard. He said nothing but quickly drew two cards from the larger deck. The King of Swords and the Queen of Wands joined the first. His grey eyes then flashed to Deanna.

"The Lovers," Deanna stated, reaching for the card and trying not to smile at Picard's obvious discomfort. "The sun shines in the zenith. Beneath is a great winged figure with arms extended. In the foreground stand two human figures, male and female, unveiled before each

other. Behind the man is the Tree of Life. Behind the female, the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Both figures suggest youth, vitality and love, before it is contaminated by gross material desire. This card, in all its simplicity, is the card of human love."

Geordi immediately began to snicker. Deanna could not help but smile as she discarded the card and turned to the next. "The suit is Swords," she said, "and represents isolation and the darker aspects of man."

"Ooooo," Riker muttered.

Deanna ignored him, her eyes fixed on Picard. "The King," she said, "sits in judgement, holding an unsheathed sword. He represents virtue, or the power of life and death in virtue of his office." Now she glanced at Riker and said, "He embodies power, command, judgement, authority and intelligence."

"She got you there, Riker," La Forge taunted.

"Hey!" Riker said. "Did I ask for this abuse?"

"May as well have," Geordi retorted.

"The suit is Wands," Deanna interrupted, holding up the Captain's final card, "and represents, as I said before, life and animation. The Queen sits on her throne, her wand in her left hand and a sunflower in her right. This card's placement, in that it follows a King, indicates the Queen is well disposed toward him. Add to that the drawing of The Lovers, and the Captain's card can mean only one thing: the high probability of love on the horizon."

All eyes were on Picard. He cleared his throat, pulled down on his uniform shirt, and simply said, "Intriguing."

No one dared utter a word, but Deanna could sense everyone's amusement. "Commander Data," she said, and handed him the cards.

The android's hands were an instant blur of motion. When they did finally come to rest three cards lay before him. The Fool, the King of Cups, and an upside-down card bearing the Roman numeral eight. Data made to straighten the reversed card.

"No, Data," Deanna warned. "An inverted card carries a different meaning from an upright card." His hand fell immediately to his lap.

"I will begin with The Fool," she said, and picked up the card in question. "Contrary to its title, I believe Data could not have picked a better card. As you can see, The Fool is portrayed with a light step and stands at the brink of a precipice among the great heights of the world. He surveys the blue expanse of sky above rather than the shadowy prospects below. He carries over his right shoulder a pole with a bag at its end. It is said the bag holds his many subconscious memories. His countenance is full of intelligence and expectant dreams. He is prince of the other world on his travels through this one. He is the spirit in search of experience."

She placed the card on top of its deck and picked up the King of Cups. "The suit of Cups represents dreams, hopes and emotions. Here you see the King, seated on his throne, which is set upon the sea. He holds a short sceptre in his left hand and a great cup in his right. He is a man of creative imagination, inclined toward art and science. His doctrine: the right to give to each man his just rewards. He stands for impartiality and fairness."

She disposed of the card and reached for the last. "This is the eight of the suit called Pentacles, being these stars surrounded by the golden circles," she explained. "Pentacles represent money, inheritance and business ventures. Here you see an artist at his work. Data placed this card upside-down, which signifies possession of skill, and in the sense of the ingenious mind, which," she added, "you must all admit aptly describes Data's mind, denotes a possible turning to cunning and intrigue."

She returned the card to its deck and summarized. "Data's cards reveal a spirit in search of experience, but not of the world around him. It could be interpreted to mean an android. Data does have a creative imagination, as we can all attest. His ingenious mind, however, may turn to cunning and intrigue."

"Do you have devious plans we should know of, Data?" Riker questioned immediately.

"None that I can think of," Data answered innocently.

"Let us know when you do," Riker chuckled.

"Lt Worf," Deanna said, and handed the Klingon the cards.

Worf scowled but began the shuffling process. Soon his three cards lay before him.

"The Moon," Deanna began, "shown in its fullness but revealing a quarter face, shines on two towers, between which a path winds to the skyline. On the left, a dog and on the right, a wolf howl at the moon. In the foreground there is water out of which a crayfish moves toward land. This card illuminates man's animal nature, which I interpret in Worf's case to mean the inborn Klingon nature." She paused. "However, the face of the moon directs a calm gaze upon the unrest below. Its message: peace, be still, there shall come a calm upon the animal nature while the abyss below shall cease from giving up a form."

She put the card on top of the Major Arcana deck and reached for the second card Worf had drawn.

"As you can see," she said, "the Knight of Swords is riding his mount at great speed, as if scattering his enemies. His sword, raised in challenge in his right hand, is swift and sure because he is pure of heart. He is a man of arms, brave and skilful, and heroic action shall follow him."

Worf actually grinned, and Deanna went on.

"The three of Cups depicts three maidens with cups uplifted, as if in celebration. This card represents the conclusion of any matter in victory and fulfilment, and, for a military man, unexpected advancement."

"No summary is needed, Counselor," Worf growled, but she sensed the satisfaction behind his gruff expression.

"Beverly," Deanna said, offering the cards.

The Doctor smiled. "Why do I feel so apprehensive?" she asked as she shuffled the Major Arcana.

"Maybe the cards will tell us," Geordi offered.

"Your time is coming, La Forge," Riker said again.

When the Doctor turned over her first card there came the audible sound of multiple intakes of breath. Crusher's eyes swung to Picard's. He quickly looked at Deanna. She nodded her head. Riker started to laugh. Data spoke.

"Is it significant that both the Captain and Doctor Crusher have pulled The Lovers?" he asked curiously.

"It could be interpreted that way," Deanna said. "Choose your other cards, Beverly."

The six of Swords was quickly followed by the five of Cups. Both cards were reversed. "This had better be good, Deanna," Beverly warned.

"You chose the cards, Doctor," Data stated. "Why are you angered at the Counselor?"

"I'm not angry," the Doctor stated, "but as much as I can see the person choosing the cards seemingly controls which cards are revealed, I'm beginning to believe there is some kind of trick involved."

"There is no trick, Beverly," Deanna responded, "believe me. I am simply interpreting the cards as they are drawn." She picked up The Lovers.

"I have already explained this card," she went on, "and the implied significance of two out of five picking the same card, especially The Lovers, cannot be ignored. Unless Geordi or myself also pick it, the implied ramifications stand."

"And what might they be?" Riker questioned.

"Enough, Number One," Picard interjected.

Deanna smiled, disposed of the card and picked up the reversed five of Cups. "Here we see a dark cloaked figure looking sideways at three prone cups. Two other cups stand upright behind him. In the background we see a bridge leading to a small castle." She described the card. "It is a card of loss but something remains over," she explained. "Beverly placed this card upside-down which speaks of the return of some relative who has not been seen for some time."

"Wesley?" the Doctor questioned.

"That, the cards do not tell," Deanna answered, "but the last card added to your first, may give a possible explanation for his return."

"What are you getting at, Deanna?" Crusher asked suspiciously.

Deanna smiled, discarded the five of Cups and picked up the six of Swords. "A ferryman carries two passengers. His course is smooth. His freight, the six swords which stand upright in his craft, is light. It may be said that his work is not beyond his strength. The card itself represents a pleasant journey." She paused. "But the card appeared reversed, which, when added to The Lovers, can have only one divinatory meaning: a proposal of love."

Beverly scoffed and pushed the cards to La Forge.

"This gets better and better all the time," Riker said.

The Captain purposely ignored his First Officer. Deanna noticed, but the Doctor was looking at Picard out of the corner of her eye with a smile on her lips. He met her gaze and smiled in return.

La Forge spoke in a whisper. He held a deck in each hand. "I want a proposal of love," he stated mischievously. "I want strength, power, an ingenious mind, and advancement in my chosen field. I want it all." He grinned broadly and shuffled each individual deck and chose his cards: The Chariot, the King of Pentacles and the two of Cups.

"Incredibly, it seems as if your wish has been granted," Deanna said as she reached for his first card. "The Chariot," she explained, "is a card of triumph. An erect and princely figure rides a chariot. His sword is drawn. It is said he has led captivity captive. He is conquest on all planes: in the mind, in science and in progress, but, above all things, triumph of the mind. The tests of initiation through which he has passed in victory are to be understood physically and rationally." She reached for the next card.

"The King of Pentacles stares at the suit's symbol he holds in his right hand, while in his left he holds a sceptre. He stands for valour, and sometimes mathematical gifts and attainments of that kind. He is a master."

"On the two of Cups we see a young male and female, their cups raised in tribute to each other. Over their heads appears a winged lion's head. This card denotes the inter-relation of the sexes and that desire which is not of nature but by which nature is sanctified. It is a card of love, wealth and honour."

"Right on!" Geordi exclaimed. "I believe! I believe!"

Everyone laughed, except Geordi who continued grinning widely. "Come on, Deanna," he said impetuously. "Let's see what the cards say about you."

What will the cards say? she thought as she scooped up the two decks and began the shuffling process. The cards knew her intimately, if a person believed in such things. What would they speak of?

She drew first The Star from the Major Arcana, and then, from the Lesser Arcana, the Queen of Cups and the ten of Cups. Instantly, Deanna was both satisfied and intrigued.

"The Star," she began, holding up the applicable card. "We see a great radiant star, surrounded by seven lesser stars. The female in the foreground is unclothed, her left knee on land and her right foot in water, thus joining land and sea. She pours the Waters of Life from two chalices, and behind her, on the rising ground to her right, is a tree on which a bird alights." She paused self-consciously before saying, "The Star represents eternal youth and beauty. That which she communicates to the living is the substance of the heavens and the elements. She is truth unveiled."

"Wow!" Riker and La Forge uttered as one.

The Counselor smiled and reached for her next card. "The Queen of Cups," she said, "is one who sees visions in the cup she holds. This is, however, only one of her aspects. She sees, but she also acts, and her activity feeds dreams. She denotes a woman of equivocal character, a perfect spouse and a good mother."

"Deanna," Riker teased and reached for her hand. She abruptly evaded his grasp.

"There's more," she said and reached for her final card. "The ten of Cups. Here we see the ten cups in the shape of a rainbow. It is contemplated in wonder by a man and a woman below. The man's right arm is around the woman's waist. His left is raised upward. Two children dance nearby, but have not observed the prodigy. Still, they are happy in their own manner. There is a home-scene beyond." She paused. "The divinatory meaning of this card is contentment and peace of the heart. It could be interpreted as an upcoming good marriage and one beyond expectation."

She placed the card on its appropriate deck and turned her eyes to those around her. "Well?" she questioned. "What do you think of the Tarot cards now?"

Surprisingly, Worf was the first to answer. "I am pleased to have such an ancient talisman confirm my abilities and beliefs," he said.

"I would be most interested in learning more about these Tarot cards, Counselor," Data added. "To think that they have endured from the 14th century to the 24th is astounding."

"I would be pleased to enlighten you, Data," Deanna replied.

"What can I say?" Geordi asked. "I taunted your interpretation of the cards throughout this evening. Still, they gave to me everything I asked for."

"I too had a favourable reading," Riker stated, "and, like Geordi, I too was sceptical. The question that stands out in my mind, however, is what is to develop between the Captain and our fine Doctor?"

At once Picard rose to his feet. He purposely met everyone's startled glances as he walked around the table to where the Doctor sat. His hands fell to the back of her chair and he bent forward to whisper in her ear.

"Beverly," he said, in a tone meant for everyone to hear, "I would be honoured if you would allow me to walk you to your quarters."

She gracefully allowed him to pull out her chair and rose to her feet. Slipping her arm through his, she said, "By all means, Jean-Luc." A devilish gleam came to her eye and was instantly reflected in the Captain's. He started her for the door. "We must," she went on, "take steps to ensure Wesley is here before..." She let her voice fade purposely as the door slid open before them.

"I wish you all a good evening," Picard said over his shoulder, and the door slid closed behind them.

Deanna, Will, Geordi, Worf and even Data all looked at each other in open amazement, and then immediately started to laugh.



THE HUNTER AND THE HUNTED

by

Lisa Dearnley-Davison

Captain's Log, Stardate 44255.7. We are en route to Gamma Librae VII, where a Federation colony is awaiting delivery of a replacement particle decelerator that we are transporting at the request of Starfleet Science Command. We anticipate arrival within the next six hours.

The Captain completed his log entry in time to hear the end of his First Officer's quip.

"And the Admiral walks in and says, 'I hope that's not Ferengi!'"

"I can't say I've heard that one before," Deanna commented.

Picard was about to add his own comments on what he thought of Riker's joke when he was interrupted by an insistent chirruping from the tactical station. Worf examined the console and, after much deliberation, looked up.

"Sir, I think you should hear this."

"Yes, Lieutenant? On speakers."

Worf tapped the console. Moments later, the bridge was filled with a harsh static that rapidly gave way to a guttural voice.

"Attention! Attention! This is a priority one distress call. I repeat, this is a priority one distress call. We have been..."

"That appears to be the end of the message, sir," said Data, turning to look at the Captain.

"Lieutenant Worf, can you clean up and trace that transmission?"

"I can try, sir."

"If I may, Captain?"

Picard nodded his consent, and Data continued.

"The distress signal is being repeated on subspace frequencies employed only by early Starfleet communications systems. It is little wonder that the transmission is of such poor quality." Data paused a moment and was about to continue when he was interrupted by Lieutenant Worf.

"Sir, I have managed to trace the source of the transmission. It appears to be coming from somewhere in sector 10041."

Riker, who had been examining the readout on his own console, looked up with surprise.

"Sector 10041? That's out toward the Orion Arm, isn't it?"

"Correct, sir," Data answered. "According to Starfleet records, with the exception of one scout ship, the sector has never been visited by a Starfleet vessel."

"Really?" Picard smiled and looked at his First Officer. "And if I'm not mistaken, Number One, the Enterprise's primary mission is to expand the frontiers of Federation knowledge, is it not?"

"I do believe you're right, sir," Riker agreed.

"In that case, Mr Crusher, plot a course for the source of the transmission."

Wesley turned to his console. "Aye, sir."

"Warp eight." Picard paused a second, and, with his infamous sweep of the arm, added, "Engage."

The ship turned about and accelerated into warp speed on its new course.

"It seems our present mission will have to wait a while. Mr Worf, send a transmission to the colony as well as to Starfleet to inform them of our change of schedule." Picard turned to Deanna, who was seated to his left. "I know you haven't much to go on, Counselor, but could you glean anything at all from the transmission?"

Deanna thought for a moment.

"The speaker was clearly very afraid of something, almost to the point of absolute terror. However, I also believe that, whatever it was, it was consciously trying to hold something back, as if it wanted help but didn't or couldn't reveal the exact nature of the problem."

"What about you, Number One?" The Captain turned back to his First Officer.

"They said it was a priority one distress signal. We can't ignore it," he answered as if the statement was all that was required.

Picard raised one eyebrow. "What about the risk to ourselves?"

"With all due respect, sir, someone is asking for our help. We must at least try."

At that moment, Worf interrupted, saving Riker from any further explaining. "Captain, we are picking up another transmission from the planet."

"Put it on speakers."

"This transmission is visual, sir."

"Strange. I wonder why this one is and the other wasn't? Put it on screen, then, Mr Worf." Picard's brow furrowed deeply.

"Aye, sir."

The stars, moving at warp speed, disappeared and were replaced with snowy static that gradually gave way to a fuzzy picture of an alien being sitting at a control station. Picard stood and walked slowly forward, Riker following a few steps behind. The bridge fell deathly silent. The alien was a felinoid being. Although most of its features were humanoid, the shape of its mouth, slitted eyes, and pointed ear tufts suggested some other lineage. It finally turned to face the screen, its eyes wide with terror.

"I do not have long, so I will make this plea short. Somehow, many of our people have contracted some sort of virus. It has turned them into savages. Even now, they are patrolling the streets, looking for others, either to join them or feed them. The members of the government are all gone. There are just a few of us left sane, and they are hiding in the mountains. I am giving my life to make this plea in the hope that someone out there will aid us before it is too late."

The alien paused, turned its head toward the door, and, hefting a large, metal-looking pole, stood.

"Please help those who still survive."

The door to the room smashed open, and two wild-eyed, ferocious-looking aliens barrelled in, one with a knife, the other with a large and very sharp-looking piece of metal. The officers on the bridge watched in horrified silence as the two crazed aliens attacked the other, killing it with one blow, spilling its blood over the console and cutting off the signal.

"Mr Crusher, alter speed to warp nine. These people are in desperate need of help." Picard turned. "I shall be in my ready room. Inform me when we reach the planet. Number One, you have the bridge." He walked off the bridge.

Once in his room, Picard ordered his favourite drink. "Tea, Earl Grey, hot."

He had just sat down when his door chimed.

"Come."

Deanna Troi walked in with a very worried frown darkening her face.

"Counselor." He offered a seat, and she sat down.

"I can sense much tension and fear in the crew on the bridge. It is quite unsettling." Under Deanna's cool, rich voice, Picard could hear her own tension.

"It's not surprising, considering what they've just seen." Picard sat back. "However, these people have asked for our help. We can't just turn them away."

"If it infects the crew then it will kill a thousand. When the ship is found, it could kill a thousand more."

"What you are saying is, can I risk the many for the good of the few?" Picard frowned. "It's a whole planet at stake here. A whole civilisation."

"It is a hard decision to make, Captain. Starfleet will probably order us to quarantine the planet and leave immediately for our original destination."

"What would you do, Counselor?"

"I don't know."

Picard's communicator beeped.

"Sir, we are approaching the planet now," Commander Riker informed the Captain.

"I'm on my way." Picard stood. "You have given me a great deal to think about, Counselor. Shall we?" He escorted her back out to the bridge. "Standard orbit, Mr Crusher," announced the Captain, settling into his chair. "Lt Worf, I want a full sensor scan of the surface. Mr Data, see if you can gain access to the planet's computer network. I want to know if there's anything else we haven't been told. Lt Kal, run a full analysis of the planet. I want to know everything there is to know about the place before we even consider an away team."

"Aye, sir," four voices chorused simultaneously as the bridge sprang into life.

The silent, serene planet hung before them on the viewscreen. Lush green in colour, it was hard to believe that such a beautiful planet harboured such a deadly virus. Several hours passed, the crew working intently on their tasks. Picard had informed the rest of the crew of their slight detour and the dangers it brought. He now waited patiently in the conference room for the results of the tasks he had set.

The door opened, and he turned from his post at the viewing port. It was Counselor Troi.

"You're the first to arrive, Counselor."

"Someone has to be," she countered, taking a seat.

They sat in silence, waiting for the others to arrive. Data and Worf were next, followed by Riker and the Andorian lieutenant, Kal. Seeing that the meeting was almost complete, he contacted Dr Crusher and Lt Commander La Forge and requested that they join them in the conference room. When everyone was finally seated, Picard asked Kal for his report.

"The planet is a basic class M world with a slightly higher atmospheric oxygen content than Earth. There are pockets of a metallic ore right across the planet, and, judging by the amount of scarring, this was quite a large mining colony, albeit twenty or so years ago. There are two large oceans and quite a number of connecting waterways spreading throughout the three main continents."

"What about life?" Picard asked.

"There are various assorted animal life forms present both in the sea and away from the cities," replied Data. "The most prominent species is felinoid. They appear to populate only one continent, the most mountainous one, although there are several small settlements along some of the larger connecting waterways."

"When did the scout ship conduct the initial scan of this sector?" Riker interrupted.

"Seventy-eight point three years ago, sir," answered Data.

"And what were the results?" Picard leaned forward.

"There was one populated planet. However, on closer examination, the prominent species rated only a D-plus on the Richter Scale of Culture. The planet was placed in

quarantine, and we are the first to make contact with anyone from the planet since that date. The next examination of the planet is due to take place seven months from now."

"Thank you, Data." The Captain clasped his hands, a look of thoughtfulness crossing his brow. "It looks as if we came along just in time. In seven months from now, there may be no sentient life to investigate on this planet."

"But what about the danger to the ship?" For the first time, the Counselor entered the conversation. "We know so little about what is happening on the planet. It may affect us just as easily."

"They have asked for our help. We can't just ignore them. They are obviously more technologically advanced now than seventy-eight years ago or else they wouldn't have been able to contact us."

"Counselor Troi has a valid point, Number One," interrupted the Captain.

"Maybe we could help them without actually exposing ourselves to whatever they've got," Geordi suggested.

Everyone turned to look at him.

"Yes," said Beverly. "It could be possible. If we beamed down to an area in one of the cities, I could collect blood and tissue samples from some of them."

"But what if it's an airborne virus?" prompted Deanna.

"We could beam down in environmental suits."

"How are you going to find someone infected willing to give you the samples you need?" This question came from Geordi.

"There must be bodies. These aliens are on the rampage, killing everything in sight."

"I think we get the idea, Doctor. Number One, prepare an away team. Include a small Security detachment. Doctor, prepare what you need for collecting the samples."

Riker stood. "Data, Worf, I want both of you to come with me."

Worf tapped his communicator as he followed Riker out of the conference lounge.

"Ensigns Howes and Larp, report to transporter room three."

Moments later, the conference lounge was empty, everyone having left to carry out his or her duties. There was a potentially dangerous mission ahead, and the away team could afford no mistakes.

By the time Beverly Crusher joined the rest of the away team in the transporter room, they were already in their environmental suits and ready to go. Riker was giving last-minute orders to Chief O'Brien, while Worf and his team checked their equipment. Beverly climbed into her suit as Worf approached, carrying a very large and lethal-looking weapon.

"Doctor, all members of the away team must be armed," his deep voice commanded.

Beverly looked up from her suit fastening, a frown appearing as she saw the weapon he was carrying. A phaser II, it was larger than the phaser normally carried by away team members and even more deadly.

"I don't have to." The fastening jammed again. "Damn."

"Doctor, I must insist..."

Riker looked round as Worf raised his voice.

"What's the problem here?"

"Dr Crusher is refusing to carry her phaser, sir." The Klingon's impatience was beginning to show.

"Will, you know I hate those things," protested Beverly.

"The Captain said everyone had to be armed. Sorry, Doctor. That includes you."

Beverly sighed and took the proffered phaser. "That doesn't mean to say I'll use it," she muttered under her breath.

Finally, with her suit sealed, she followed the rest of the team onto the transporter pad.

"Phasers on heavy stun. We can't take any chances. Energise."

Beverly felt the familiar tingling sensation as the team dematerialised.

"Chief O'Brien to Captain Picard. The away team have just beamed down, sir."

"Thank you, Lieutenant. Please remain on alert. I want to be able to beam the away team back at a moment's notice."

"Aye, sir." O'Brien checked his console. The away team was on the planet and moving slowly in a northerly direction. Everything was normal.

Or so it seemed.

The away team had materialised on the edge of a large town, many bodies in varying degrees of decay littering the street. The stench was awful, and, although the environmental suits kept out the smell, only Data and Worf seemed unaffected by the sight.

"Judging by the state these bodies are in, they seem to have been left here some time," stated Dr Crusher, kneeling by one of the corpses. She took out her medical scanner and started to scan the body.

After a few moments, she looked up. Data was scanning another body a few metres away. Worf, Howes, and Larp were scanning the area for other signs of life. Only Riker was left watching her.

"This one was a victim." She stood and faced him. "I've taken the samples and scans I need, but I also need someone who has been infected to compare against."

Data stood.

"This one was a victim also."

"Data, take some readings from some of the other bodies so I've got more to compare. It may be a genetic disorder rather than a virus or disease. If it is, I want as much data as I can get my hands on."

"Yes, Doctor." Data set about his task.

"What else do we need to do?" asked Riker.

"We still have to find a contaminated body."

"Sir!" Worf's call diverted Riker's attention.

"What is it, Lieutenant?"

"There is a life form moving among the buildings approximately fifteen metres above the ground."

"Sounds like someone is prowling across the roof." Riker turned back to the doctor. "Maybe you'll get your wish sooner than you think. Mr Worf, prepare for an attack from above."

The away team moved back from the buildings, searching for any movement which might give them some clue to where the alien might be hiding. As if on cue, one of the cat-like beings launched itself from a third-storey window directly above Beverly Crusher. Fear paralysed her as the snarling being came rushing toward her and the ground. She felt something solid hit her, and she went sprawling. Phaser fire erupted from all around her, and she got shakily to her feet. It was not the beast that had knocked her over but Will Riker, who was now lying unconscious on the ground. The alien was off to one side, its head at a sickening angle. It was not the phaser fire that had killed it but the fall.

Its neck is broken, thought Beverly as she knelt beside the unmoving form of Riker. Worf was looking over her shoulder.

"It doesn't look too bad," she said unconvincingly. "He hit his head on that stone. Data, can you get the samples I need from that body? I'm going to beam up with Commander Riker. Crusher to Enterprise, two to beam directly to sickbay."

"Enterprise here. I've got you, Doctor."

They dematerialised.

"I have the samples, Lt Worf. We may leave now." Data folded his tricorder away.

"Pah! These cat-like creatures are no warriors. Sneaking up from behind is a coward's way. They deserve to die."

"Enterprise, four to beam up."

"Aye, sir."

When the away team materialised on the ship, the Captain was waiting for them.

"What happened down there?" he asked Data.

"One of the felinoid beings used the cover of the buildings to attack us."

"Why didn't you detect him in time?"

"Sir." The big Klingon was seething with anger. "They do not deserve our help. It attacked us from above, knocking Commander Riker over and nearly killing him. We could not defend against such a cowardly attack. They are not worthy of our aid."

"If I may, sir?" Picard turned back to Data. "The alien was infected with the virus. It is unlikely that it knew what its actions were. If it did, it would not have jumped from the window."

"What happened to it?"

"It was killed instantly."

"And it deserved it."

Picard turned once more to Worf.

"Lieutenant, you are excused." Picard nodded to the other two Security officers, who also left. "Data, come with me to sickbay."

The trip down to sickbay was made in silence. The doors to the turbolift opened, and Data followed Picard out.

"What went wrong?" Picard wondered out loud.

"Nothing, sir."

Picard stopped and turned to face Data.

"Then how was it possible for one of my crewmembers to be hospitalised?"

"Commander Riker was thrown to the ground by the felinoid being after pushing Doctor Crusher out of its path."

Picard continued to walk. "But why didn't the tricorders pinpoint the alien's exact location?"

"The buildings have a very high content of an unknown metal. It caused the tricorders to give an unusual reading when trying to locate the felinoid being inside the buildings."

"Unusual? In what way?"

"The felinoid being appeared to lack substance, and, therefore, it was impossible for the tricorders to lock on to the lifeform."

"So how was it detected in the first place?"

"At first, the felinoid being was travelling on the roof. It then entered some taller building from which it jumped."

They reached the doors to sickbay and entered. Riker was sitting upright on one of the beds, while Beverly was examining his arm. He was preparing to get off the bed when Beverly pulled him back.

"Oh, no, you don't. I'm not finished."

"What's the diagnosis, Doctor?" asked the Captain.

"That thing managed to tear Will's suit and scratch his arm." She passed another instrument over the site of the wound. "And he's got a nasty lump on the back of his head."

"Then he's all right?"

"That scratch may be infected with whatever that thing had. I want to keep him under observation for a few days."

"Hey, I'm fine. There's absolutely nothing wrong," protested Riker.

"If the Doctor wishes you to stay - Picard looked at Crusher, who nodded - "then you'll have to stay. Keep me informed, Doctor." He turned to leave.

"Wait a minute," said Riker, standing.

Picard turned.

"Will, something on that planet has nearly wiped out the whole population. We can't afford to take any more risks. Work with Data on the information he's collected for Doctor Crusher. That should keep you out of mischief."

Riker watched him leave.

"Great. Now I have to live in this place for the next forty-eight hours."

"I'll want to take readings every two hours anyway," said Beverly. "If anything develops, I want to know straight away."

"Hmph. Okay, Data, let's see what you've got." He sat down next to Data at the computer terminal.

Some hours and examinations later, they were still no closer to the answer than before. Beverly, who had been following some of her own ideas, had at least found the damning bacteria and the way it was passed from victim to victim.

She called Picard to sickbay to explain her findings.

"So it's passed by touch?"

"Not just by touch. The skin must be broken in both parties as it's passed through direct contact with the contaminated blood."

"Explain."

Beverly moved her computer screen round for Picard to see.

"Out of the eleven victims we scanned, each one had the virus in their bloodstreams, but none had developed it fully. The amount the virus had developed seemed to be determined by how long that victim had survived once struck by a carrier of the virus. In most cases, the victims died from fright or blood loss." She paused to take a breath. "Some had had their necks broken, as if they'd been pushed from one of the upper storeys."

"And you are saying these all contracted the virus from touching their killers?"

"Not just touching. While some had been scratched in a struggle, others had been bitten."

"So this virus can be passed fairly easily."

"In a way. If a contaminated alien had just punched its victim, then it is unlikely that the virus would spread to that victim. However, as the wounds inflicted have all drawn blood from the victim, the virus has spread fairly easily."

"What about Riker?"

"So far, he has shown no signs of being contaminated, and I can't find any trace of the bacteria in his bloodstream."

"Doctor!" Data appeared at the door. "Commander Riker is feeling unwell."

Beverly left her seat in her office, Picard following, and charged into sickbay. Riker was lying on one of the beds, sweating and shaking violently.

"What happened?" Beverly's question was directed at one of the nurses.

"He was complaining of feeling too hot, so I said I'd run a scan. When he lay down, he started to shake, and it's getting worse."

Beverly could hear the anxiousness in the young Ensign's voice. "All right, Tom. I'll take over. Help me get him on to the diagnostic bed."

Only Riker's laboured breathing could be heard as Beverly took readings from her equipment.

"Doctor?" Picard's voice was questioning.

She turned to look at him.

"It's there and developing more rapidly than in any of the other examples I've seen."

"What do you suggest?"

"Round-the-clock observation, and I'm going to have to sedate him before he starts to do any damage to himself or others."

"Mom, dad." Picard and Beverly turned to look at the feverish First Officer. He was

staring, unfocused, into the lights above. "Why's it so hot in here? Is it summer already?"

Beverly wiped his brow.

"Go to sleep, Will," she said as she administered a sedative.

"Okay, mom." He closed his eyes, his breathing becoming less laboured.

"I have to get back to the bridge. We are trying to locate those not infected, but the one that makes up most of the mountains is proving difficult to penetrate. I will post an armed guard outside sickbay." Picard held up his hands as Beverly started to protest. "We can't take any more risks than we already have. Please inform me if you make any further discoveries." He left sickbay.

Moments later, the doors swished open again. Beverly was about to protest against a Security detail being inside sickbay when Deanna entered.

"How is he?"

"Burning up with a fever I can't cure or even control." Beverly sighed. "There must be something I've overlooked somewhere."

"Doctor?"

"Be with you in a minute, Data. Deanna, could you do me a favour?" When Deanna nodded, she continued. "Keep an eye on Will. If he shows signs of waking up, call me. And try to keep him cool."

"How?"

"The best thing I can think of is a cloth and cold water," the doctor replied, walking over to Data. "What have you found, Data?"

"I have managed to trace all the steps of the virus. It starts with a slow fever which slowly builds up. This is followed by hallucinations."

"He's already on to that part. Continue."

"The victim slowly becomes weaker, and the hallucinations get worse, until it becomes a madness. In the felinoid beings' case, this madness turned them into vicious savages."

Beverly turned to look at Riker. As she watched, he twitched violently until Deanna spoke to him in soft tones.

"But what will it do to Commander Riker?" she wondered out loud.

Picard had retired to his ready room. His favourite drink was getting cold as he paced the floor.

"It was all my fault. I should never have let an away team beam down. I should have listened to Deanna. We should have informed Starfleet and quarantined the planet." The pacing continued and his frown deepened. "The best First Officer in the fleet is lying in

sickbay, his mind slowly disintegrating, turning him into something he's not, and there's nothing I can do about it." He stopped to look out at the planet through his viewing port. "And it's all my fault."

He went back onto the bridge. "Lieutenant Commander La Forge, have you found them yet?"

Geordi shook his head. "Not even a trace, sir."

Captain Picard sighed and sat down in his chair. "Keep trying. Use all the resources you need."

"Yes, sir."

Beverly, having found no further leads to the virus, was now trying to trace its origin.

"Computer, please list all known diseases and viruses which meet the specified parameters, and their origins."

"Working. There are seven hundred twenty-three known diseases and viruses which meet the specified parameters."

"Oh, good grief."

"Please repeat your request."

"What? Oh, sorry. Please proceed."

Information started to fill her screen, and she sighed. This was going to take a while.

Data, however, had something else in mind.

"Computer, please list all Federation and non-Federation ships that have travelled through this sector in the last seventy-eight point three years."

The computer complied.

Some time later, Data sat back with a satisfied sigh, a newly-acquired observation. "Most interesting," he said. "Data to Picard. I have some information that may be of use, sir."

"I'm on my way. Picard out."

Picard arrived in sickbay looking somewhat exhausted. In the last forty-eight hours, he had had no sleep, and it was beginning to show.

"What have you got, Data?" the Captain asked.

"The felineoid beings have become traders with other local planets. Although they have no space travel, the other planets were willing to travel to trade for the resource which is rich on their planet."

"Which is...?"

"A extremely pure form of metal which is used in spaceship construction. They traded with the other planets for approximately seventeen point four years but stopped nineteen point eight years ago."

"Any idea as to why?" Picard's frown deepened.

"They claimed the resource had been depleted even though other parts of the planet are still rich with the metal. The trading planets broke all ties with this one in order to try to scare them back into trading."

"I take it it didn't work?"

"No, sir, it did not. There has been no contact with any other ship until a small freighter three months ago."

"Have you been able to identify the freighter?"

"Not yet. However, I may be able to determine its flight path."

"Make it so, Mr Data. This may be the only lead we have."

There was a loud groan followed by a crash, and a scream pierced the air. Data was first out of his seat, followed by Picard, who collided with Beverly outside her office.

"It has to be Riker," she said, picking up her dropped hypo. "He must have come round."

They entered sickbay. Worf and one of his men were just inside the door, armed and ready to fire. A broken bowl and a pool of water were on the ground. Data was trying to sidle around one side of Riker, while Deanna tried to coax him out of the corner he crouched in.

"Stay away from me," he screamed, cowering even further. He was shaking even more ferociously than before. "Leave me alone." His eyes flashed from person to person. Terror contorted his face.

"He's terrified of us," said Picard, amazed. "He doesn't even recognise us."

"More hallucinations. He probably doesn't even see us at all. We have to sedate him again before the virus drives him completely mad." Beverly picked up a different hypo. "Will," she called.

He turned to look at her. "Mom?" he squinted.

Beverly flashed a look at Picard. "It's me, Will. You're just having a bad dream."

"There's monsters and things here," he whimpered.

Picard waved Worf and the other Security guard out. Reluctantly, they left.

"I've got something that will take the monsters away," Beverly said softly as she walked toward him.

Riker remained crouched in the corner, his shaking subsiding as she administered the sedative again.

"Help me get him back onto the bed."

Data and Picard lifted the now-drowsy First Officer back onto the diagnostic bed.

"Are you any closer to the answer, Doctor?" Picard asked.

"No, although I've managed to narrow it down to one hundred thirty-five possibilities."

"Data has come up with a possible lead. He may have identified the ship that could have brought the virus," Picard said. "He was about to start tracing its flight path."

"If we can determine where the ship came from, we may be able to narrow down the virus still further." For the first time in the past forty-eight hours, Beverly's face showed hope.

"Is there anything I can do?" asked Deanna, coming over.

Picard turned to look at her. "You could go and get some sleep." It was not a suggestion; it was an order.

"She's not the only one who could do with some sleep," said Beverly. "Sir," she added.

"I should really get back to the bridge, but perhaps you're right," muttered the Captain, rubbing his eyes. "Inform me of any changes."

"Of course." Data and Beverly returned to their respective computers, and Deanna and Picard left sickbay.

They walked silently to the turbolift and got in. "Officers' quarters," ordered Picard.

"You must stop blaming yourself," Deanna said softly.

"Computer, halt." The turbolift stopped. "How can I not blame myself, Counselor?" The frown returned. "I ordered the away team to beam down. You warned me this might happen, but I didn't listen. If we had just quarantined the planet, none of this would have happened."

"If you had then all of those life forms would be dead within the next month."

"At the rate we are going, they still will be. And now Will. If we can't find the answer, he will slowly go insane, and he'll never know why."

"Data and Beverly are doing all they can for him."

"But will it be enough?" Picard turned away. "Deanna, my decision has sentenced Will to a life imprisoned in his own mind. How will I ever forget that?"

"You never will, but there is a ship full of other people who rely on you. Nobody ever said that space was safe. Will knew the dangers, just as everyone else does. He wanted to go down to that planet."

"He did save Beverly. But that doesn't mean to say I should have let him go. I shouldn't have let any of them go. Computer, resume."

The turbolift continued, and the remainder of the journey was made in silence.

Beverly was taking five minutes out from her work to drink a soothing cup of hot chocolate. It was four in the afternoon. Three days had passed since Riker had been brought back on board infected. His condition was as stable as it could be given the circumstances, but he was heavily sedated to stop his mind from being overcome by the virus.

Wesley stuck his head round the door. "Hi, mom. How's Commander Riker doing?" he asked.

Beverly looked up. "No better than this morning."

"Gosh, you look terrible!"

"Gee, thanks," replied Beverly, rubbing her eyes. "How was school today?"

"Not bad. We're doing medicine in history at the moment. Nineteenth century. Did you know the fastest amputation was done in fourteen seconds? And they had all these weird diseases back then. Ones that were so bad they killed thousands of people before they were stopped. Some couldn't even be cured."

"Thousands of people, huh?"

"Yeah. They had all these awful plagues. Some were spread through flies, others through animals. One cure was a virus itself."

Beverly smiled. "Most are." The smile dropped.

"What's wrong, mom?" Wesley asked. "Was it something I said?"

"Yes." Beverly sat back down at her computer. "Computer, please list all known viruses that were spread by animals on nineteenth-century Earth."

"Working."

Wesley sighed as his mother became totally engrossed in the information scrolling past on the screen, and he left her to it.

An hour later, Beverly charged past Data, calling for Selaar to join her in the lab. They still had not re-emerged when Data called Captain Picard four hours later.

"Well, Data?"

"I have managed to determine the ship's origin from various computer files. The ship is called the T'Ii Sloch. A rough translation would be the Hurricane. Its origin is a small planet one point seven eight parsecs away, called Denertium IV."

"What do we know about this planet?"

"Very little. It is a very small planet with a population of approximately eight hundred thousand. While not in the Federation, it does provide some very valuable trade with the Starbase nearby. Many trade routes also pass through its system. However, about three months ago, it stopped all trading and closed all its trade routes. That freighter was the last

one to return to the planet. At warp nine, it will take over a day to reach it."

Before Picard could comment, Doctor Crusher emerged, looking extremely tired but pleased.

"We may have isolated the virus and finally produced an antidote," she announced.

Data and Picard looked up.

"Excellent, Doctor."

"It may not work since it's based on an old Earth antidote for a similar virus." Doctor Selaar started to prepare a hypo as Beverly continued her explanation. "Wesley was telling me about medicine and diseases in the nineteenth century when he happened to mention that some were spread by animals. When I looked them up, I found one with very similar symptoms to this one. It was called rabies."

Data, seeing the confused look on Picard's face, added to the explanation.

"A contagious fatal virus disease affecting dogs and similar animals, transmitted to man usually by the bite of an infected animal, causing fever and hallucinations followed by madness which destroys the infected being. Yes, Doctor, it is indeed very similar."

"But can you cure it?" asked Picard.

"We've taken the old antidote and altered it to reflect the differences in this new virus. Medically, it should work, but we must allow for the differences in the virus and the metabolism of those it infects."

There was a hiss of a hypo as Selaar injected Riker with the antidote. Everyone held their breath. Riker, however, continued to twitch and sweat.

"Give it a few minutes," said Beverly almost hopefully.

Five minutes passed, then ten. Still no change.

"Damn, I was sure it would work." Beverly looked dejected. "Back to the drawing board." She turned to go back to the labs.

"Doctor, Data may have found the origin of the virus. However, it is probably too far away to help us at this moment." Picard indicated to the information on Data's computer terminal.

"You have?" Beverly bent down to peer at the screen. "I was looking at the origins of all viruses and diseases similar to the one Riker has. Data, run a comparison. See if you can come up with the one that originates from that planet. We may not be able to go to the planet, but we may be able to isolate the virus."

Data set to work with the doctor and the Captain staring intently at the screen.

"I am sorry, Doctor. No virus or disease similar to that infecting Commander Riker comes from that system."

Beverly shook her head. "Are you sure it's too far away?"

"Yes," replied Picard. "According to Data, even at our top speed, it will take well over a day to reach it."

"And time is something those beings on the planet here don't have. I'll get back to the lab. The sooner I get to work, the sooner we may discover an antidote."

Picard nodded. "I'll be on the bridge," he said curtly and left.

Beverly returned to her lab. "Selaar, run the comparison between the old-Earth virus and this one again. There must be something we missed or didn't compensate for."

"Yes, Doctor." The Vulcan returned to the lab computer and proceeded to type in the necessary data.

Beverly turned to her own screen, her son's words still echoing in her mind. Some were spread through flies, others through animals. One cure was a virus itself.

"Maybe we're wrong about this," she thought out loud.

"Doctor?" Selaar turned.

"Maybe it's not this virus at all, but a different one that was also spread by some sort of animal or lifeform."

"That is highly unlikely, Doctor. The old-Earth virus, rabies, bears a striking resemblance to this new virus in both its cell structure and the symptoms that the victim suffers. We could, however, be looking for the wrong type of antidote."

This time it was Doctor Crusher's turn to look puzzled. "Then what type of antidote should we be looking for?"

"Not one that cures the patient, but one that will attack and kill the virus."

Beverly stared at Selaar for a moment.

"Some were spread through flies, others through animals. One cure was a virus itself," she muttered. "A cure that is a virus itself?"

"Pardon?"

"It was something Wesley said to me earlier. He's studying Earth nineteenth-century medicine in history at the moment. I remember now. There was an old virus called chicken pox or something, and they inoculated against it by using a milder form of the same virus which was carried by animals. Maybe this is the same sort of thing."

"Possibly. We would have to find a less deadly virus first."

Beverly sank further into her chair. "How can we do that? We can't go down to the planet to test all the animals for something similar."

"I wasn't suggesting we should. However, we may be able to find a suitable substitute in the computer."

"Selaar, you're a genius."

"I know."

They set to work on the data, trying possible solutions with computer simulations. After several hours, Beverly left her place to get a drink. She was reaching the end of her third consecutive day without sleep, and she was exhausted. As she ordered her lemon tea, Selaar approached her.

"Doctor." Beverly turned. "You cannot continue in this state for much longer. I can continue the comparisons and simulations quite well on my own. You really should take a rest."

Beverly blinked her eyes.

"I think you're right. I'm almost dead on my feet. I think I'll take a short nap in my office. A couple of hours ought to do it."

Selaar caught her as she collapsed to the floor.

"If you don't mind my saying it, Doctor, you need more than a couple of hours." She carried her through and placed her on one of the beds in sickbay. Leaving Beverly to the capable hands of her own staff, Selaar returned to the lab to continue with her work.

Picard had retired to his room to try and get some sleep. His earlier attempt had failed miserably, and he, too, was now on his third day without sleep. However, he still could not sleep. Thoughts about Will and the aliens on the planet kept flitting through his mind.

"Why did I let him go?" he said out loud, swinging his legs out of bed. "I should've listened to Deanna. She knew something like this would happen. She knew someone could get hurt. I knew it, but I still let them go."

He walked over to the food replicator.

"Tea, lemon, hot," he ordered. The steaming cup arrived seconds later.

He was about to sink down onto the bed with his hot drink when his door chime went. "Who is it?" he called.

"Deanna Troi," came the answer.

"Come."

The door slid open and Deanna entered.

"I'm sorry for my state of dress, Counselor, but I wasn't expecting guests." She smiled. "Is there any news?"

"No," she replied, sitting opposite. "I sensed your thoughts in turmoil. I thought you might want someone to listen."

Picard looked down at his tea. "I was trying to get some sleep, but I keep thinking about Will in sickbay. I should never have let him go down to that planet. Nobody should have gone down."

"You said yourself that it is a whole planet at stake here."

"But that doesn't mean I was right." He stood, putting the untouched tea on the table. "I should've listened to everyone's opinion and weighed up the dangers. You said yourself that the bridge crew was uneasy. I should have listened to you. You're always right."

Deanna permitted herself a small smile. "I've been wrong, too."

Picard shook his head. "What kind of commanding officer am I?"

"The kind that needs some rest."

"That's easier said than done." The Captain sank back down onto the bed. "How can I sleep while Will is in sickbay?"

"Shall I order you some sleeping tablets?" Deanna asked, concerned.

"No. I need to be alert the moment there is any news."

"If you stay up much longer, you'll collapse from exhaustion."

"You're right." Then he added, "As usual. I shall try to sleep. Thank you for listening."

Deanna recognised her exit cue. "Any time, Captain." She left.

Picard sighed and closed his eyes. It was going to be a very long night.

Beverly awoke with a start. Momentarily disoriented, she lay there while trying to get her bearings. Where was she? Sickbay. What was she doing? Sleeping. How long had she been out?

"Nurse, what's the time please?"

"Four-thirty a.m.," came the reply.

Damn, she thought. I've been out five hours. I wonder how Selaar is doing. She got shakily to her feet, tried to brush the wrinkles out of her doctor's smock, and went into the lab. Selaar turned as she entered.

"I did not expect you up for some time yet," she said, turning back to the screen.

"You should've got me up sooner. How many have we got left to test?"

"There are twenty-three more viruses to test."

Beverly did a double take.

"Twenty-three?"

"You were out five hours, fourteen minutes, Doctor."

"I know, but I didn't think you could work miracles. How many are possibles?"

"Five."

"Only five out of seven hundred twenty-three? Damn. I was hoping for a bit more to go on."

"I have been testing another theory, Doctor."

"Selaar, you never cease to amaze me. Go on. What have you got?"

"I have been altering the structure of the original virus. Rather than trying to use a similar virus with an existing antidote, I have been modifying this one."

"I already tried, but I couldn't make it work."

"I think you may wish to see the results."

"Hmmm. Yes, I can see how this would work." Beverly sat down next to Selaar. "What if we try this, and maybe this. Change that."

"Yes, I can see what you're doing. That is very similar to your original theory, only you are creating the minor virus."

"Got it in one. Let's go to work, shall we?" Beverly went back to her own computer. "I'll finish looking through the rest of the known viruses. You continue with that new one. After all," she added, "it was your idea."

Selaar nodded.

Picard woke with a jump. Moments earlier, snarling cat-like beings had been stalking him, but now it was just a distant memory. He rubbed his eyes free of sleep and looked at the old-fashioned clock he had hung on his wall. Six-thirty-three a.m., it read.

"Well, it seems I managed to get some sleep after all," he murmured. "Counselor Troi will be pleased."

He got up, showered, and dressed, drinking a cup of tea as he did so. Upon leaving his room, he decided to drop in on sickbay to see how Will was doing. He was met in the corridor by Geordi La Forge.

"Good morning, Mr La Forge. How are the alterations to the scanners going?"

"Slowly. Very slowly, Captain. We've had to completely recalibrate all the sensors. At the moment, they're all off line. If a Ferengi decides to sneak up on us..." He left the sentence open.

"How long do you think they'll be down for?" A frown appeared on Picard's brow.

"Only for about another hour, sir." The frown eased. "And I think we may be able to find the survivors when they do come back on line." The frown ceased to exist.

"Good work, Mr La Forge." The Captain entered the turbolift. "Deck twelve," he ordered.

Moments later, the Captain stepped into sickbay. He motioned to the Ensign on duty.

"Where is Dr Crusher, Ensign?" He paused. "Jackson, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir. The Doctor is in her lab with Dr Selaar."

"Ah! I take it there is no change in Commander Riker's condition."

"That is quite correct, sir. There is no change." Data stood from the computer console. "With your permission, sir, I will join Lt Commander La Forge on the bridge to aid in bringing the modified scanners on line."

"Of course, Data. I'll join you in a moment. Ensign." He turned back to the nurse. "Please inform the Doctor I was here when she next takes a break."

"Yes, sir."

The Captain joined Data at the turbolift.

"I have been able to determine the infected ship's whole journey. I have contacted each of the points at which it docked or landed, and there have been no reports of any strange viruses."

"Good. Hopefully, that means the virus has been limited to just this planet. That will make it easier to supply the antidote to those who need it."

"Doctor Crusher has found an antidote?"

"Not yet, Data. But she will."

"There is a possibility that she will not find an antidote to save those on the planet."

"I know, Data. But we must hope that she can. However, I will also need you to work on a method of distributing the antidote, when she finds it, safely." Picard stepped out of the turbolift and onto the bridge. "We don't want any accidents like the last one."

"No, sir. Once the scanners are operative, I will start work on a method of distribution."

"Thank you, Data. Status, Mr Crusher?"

"We are in standard orbit over the planet, sir. They have just reached their night cycle."

"Thank you, Mr Crusher. Mr Worf?"

"Before the scanners were taken off line, sir, we noted movement that suggested that the aliens were congregating at the foot of the mountains." On the tactical station, lights started to flash. "Sir, the scanners just came back on line."

"It looks like they might be going to hunt for those not yet infected."

"I'm picking up hazy images on the scanners, sir. It is rather blurred, but there are several life forms moving slowly up the mountain. A second group is motionless. They are still some kilometres from the first group."

"Very good, Mr Worf. Keep me apprised. I'll be in my ready room. Mr Data, you have the bridge."

"Aye, sir."

Picard settled into his chair to think. There was a possibility that both the groups were infected, or that only one of the groups was. There was a possibility that Beverly would come up with an antidote, and, of course, there was a possibility that she would not. There was also a possibility that, should she come up with an antidote, they would not find a safe way of administering it, or that all the felinoid beings would be dead. He sighed deeply.

Beverly sat back. She sighed deeply.

"What do you think?" she asked the silent Vulcan.

"The results of the computer simulations show that the antidote will work."

"But what do you think?"

"I think that the outcome will be acceptable."

"You mean, you think it will work."

"Is that not what I said?"

"Okay, let's give it a go. Prepare ten cc's to start with. The computer says ten, but that virus has had a grip on him for a long time now, and it might not work straight away."

"Shall I inform the Captain now?"

"No. Let's see if it works first."

They left the lab, Selaar carrying a hypo with the antidote.

Picard's communicator beeped. He tapped it.

"Captain Picard."

"Worf here, sir. The first group of aliens are within one and a half kilometres of the second group."

"Already? I'll be right out. Picard out."

He switched off the computer and returned yet another cup of cold tea to the replicator. Walking outside, he was confronted by the huge fuzzy outline of the mountains on the main viewer. Two separate images were also on the screen, one stationary and one moving incredibly quickly.

"Report."

"In the last minute, the first group has managed to cover half a kilometre." Worf's deep voice showed surprise.

"Half a kilometre? They'd have to possess superhuman abilities."

"Captain, it is most likely that they have the virus, and it is their madness which is driving them."

"Quite right, Data. It is obvious that the group is infected, but what about the other?"

"It is unlikely that they have the virus. The group has not moved in one hour."

"Hmmm. In that case..."

"Dr Crusher to Captain Picard."

"Picard here."

"Captain, I think you had better come down here."

Everyone turned to look at Picard.

"I'm on my way, Doctor. Picard out."

He walked toward the turbolift. The bridge was silent. He entered the turbolift and turned. Everyone was watching him. *It has to be Will*, he thought. *She sounded so grave. If anything has happened to him...* The turbolift doors closed.

He stared blankly at the doors all the way down to sickbay. Mercifully, it did not stop on the way down. He paused outside the doors. They slid open slowly.

"Will!"

There was Commander Riker, sitting up on one of the beds drinking a glass of fruit juice, and being squeezed to death by Counselor Troi.

"Dr Crusher, you're a miracle worker."

"Not me, Captain. Dr Selaar. She's the one that did all the work to find this little miracle."

Selaar cocked her head slightly. "I could not have done it without Doctor Crusher. It was she who gave me the basis for the theory which produced the final antidote."

"Is he completely cured?" the Captain asked slowly.

"We can find no trace of the original virus in his bloodstream. We were a bit surprised how fast it worked. It only took an hour from the moment we injected it."

"Doctors, I'm impressed. There is one other question. How fast can you replicate the antidote?"

"We can have enough for the inhabitants in fifteen minutes if we use all the replicators in Supplies," replied Dr Crusher.

"Make it so. Will." He turned to Riker. "Glad to have you back, Number One."

"Glad to be back, sir," said Riker. "How much longer do I have to stay here, Doc?"

"Until I'm completely satisfied that the virus will not return," retorted Dr Crusher. "Now, lie still."

Picard left sickbay, tapping his insignia as he did so. "Captain Picard to Commander Data."

"Data here, sir."

"How soon can you have that plan ready?"

Picard thought he heard cheers in the background.

"It is ready now, sir."

"Good work, Mister Data. I'm on my way. Picard out."

Within minutes, he was back on the bridge.

"Sir, I take it from your question that Dr Crusher has indeed found an antidote."

"She has, Data, along with Dr Selaar. And, yes. Commander Riker is well. Now, what's the plan?"

Picard and Data were deep in discussion when the turbolift doors opened. Picard looked up to see Geordi La Forge leave the turbolift.

"Sir, I've managed to refine our calibrations a bit better. But we'll need to take the scanners off line again."

"How long will it take?"

"No more than fifteen minutes, and we should be able to pinpoint all life forms when it's complete."

"Make it so. Mr Data, start work on your plan. Use anything you need to. Inform Dr Crusher of what you'll need. Mr Worf, select a team of fifteen of your best marksmen. Work with Mr Data in preparing your equipment." Picard walked down the ramp. "Let me know when everything is ready."

Beverly was still running checks on Riker in sickbay.

"I don't believe it. Even the swelling of that infected cut is gone."

The doors opened. Beverly turned, expecting Captain Picard again. This time, however, it was Data.

"Hey, Data. Good to see you."

"Commander Riker, it is good to see you well."

"Okay, Data, what do you want?" At Data's quizzical look, Beverly smiled. "Captain Picard warned me you were on your way down."

"Ah. I require a strong, fast-acting sedative and enough antidote for the population on the planet."

"What's the sedative for, Data?" asked Riker.

"We are going to sedate each member of the population and administer the antidote."

The doors swished open again. This time, it was Worf. "Sir, I have all the darts you requested, plus the modified rifles."

"Rifles?" Beverly looked shocked.

"I would've thought phasers would be better," added Riker.

"No, sir. We are planning on firing the darts at the felinoid beings from a safe distance. The darts will contain the sedative. Once they are sedated, we will administer the antidote."

"That's original," commented Beverly.

"Thank you," replied Data.

Twenty minutes later, Picard received a call from Data in his ready room.

"We are ready to implement the plan now, sir."

"Okay, Data. Be careful. Don't take any chances whatsoever. Is there a supply of the antidote in the shuttle should anyone become infected?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. The scanners are back on line. Geordi will relay the co-ordinates to the shuttle of each group or lifeform." Picard went to close the channel but paused. "And Data?"

"Yes, Captain?"

"Good luck. Picard out."

Picard returned to the bridge. The Ensign manning the tactical station announced the shuttle's departure. Then they waited.

Minutes ticked by in silence, the only movements coming from Geordi, who was relaying the co-ordinates, and the Ensign who was watching the scanners. The minutes turned into an hour, then a second one.

"That's the last one," Geordi finally announced after what had seemed an eternity. "Now what?"

"Recall the shuttle, and then we wait to see if the government contacts us."

The Ensign at tactical announced the return of the shuttle. "And no casualties," he added.

"Good. Have Commander Data, Dr Crusher, and Lt Worf meet me in the observation lounge."

"Yes, sir," replied the Ensign.

Picard left the bridge and went to the observation lounge. As an afterthought, he called Counselor Troi and asked her to join them. Five minutes later, they were all seated around the long table.

"Report please, Mister Data."

"There was no threat to the away team members at any time. Most of the felinoid beings were travelling in groups of six or seven, which allowed for easy sedation. We met no resistance from those not infected. We insisted, however, that they were administered the antidote."

"Why?"

"Doctor Crusher pointed out they may be carriers of the virus even though they had not yet developed it. We transported the living members of the government to the main city. They indicated that they would contact you when the population was fully awake."

Picard turned to Worf.

"Do you have anything to add, Mr Worf?"

"No, sir."

"You, Dr Crusher?"

"I was a bit shocked when Data first suggested the use of darts and rifles to sedate the aliens. But the method worked, and they won't feel any after effects."

Picard nodded. "Very good. It seems the away mission went well. Now, I think, we should return to the bridge to see what the government thought of our plan."

They filed out. Data, Worf, and Dr Crusher took the first turbolift, leaving Deanna and Picard waiting for the next.

"It worked out all right," said Deanna.

"It could quite easily have been worse, Counselor. So many things were based on chance. It looks like we have Wesley's history lesson to thank for this."

"But the main thing is, we managed to save the population and Will Riker."

"The main thing is," Picard replied, "that I should never have let the first away team beam down. However, it is up to Starfleet to decide what, if anything, should happen next."

They entered the turbolift.

"Don't worry." Deanna's soft tones provided little comfort. "What's the worse they could do to you?"

"Court martial me for placing officers in danger."

"And what's the best?"

"Commending us for a fine job and offer to send out a survey team."

"And I thought I was the only mind-reader. Knowing Starfleet, that's exactly what they'll do."

"I wish I had your confidence, Counselor."

They stepped out of the turbolift and onto the bridge.

"Captain, the government on the planet is hailing us."

"On screen, Lt Worf."

A small group of the feline beings was seated around a table in a lavish-looking hall.

"Citizens of the Federation, we are the ruling government of the Fellini. We thank you most graciously for your aid, and ask how we could possibly repay you." The aliens waited expectantly.

"We require no payment," replied Picard. "We offered our help freely."

"No payment? You have saved our entire civilisation and expect no payment for your services?" The aliens stared at each other. "If there is nothing we can offer you as payment, what can we do for you?"

"There is one area in which you can help us. Since the last time a Federation ship visited your world, you have advanced incredibly. All we ask is that you will allow a team of specialised personnel from the Federation to come and speak to you on your world about possibly opening negotiations between our two governments."

"We will allow it." The aliens nodded furiously. "Thank you again for saving our people."

"A Federation ship will be here in a week or so. It will help your people to return to normal life as best they can. Unfortunately, we must now leave you. Goodbye, and good luck."

"We will be ready for them. Thank you, and farewell."

The image of the Fellini government was replaced by stars.

"Mr Worf, send a transmission to Starfleet requesting a relief ship to carry on the work here. Inform them that the planet's inhabitants and Commander Riker are now well."

"Aye, sir."

At that moment, Commander Riker stepped out on to the bridge. There were a few cheers and welcoming smiles from around the bridge as he walked down the ramp and settled into his chair.

"Glad you could make it, Number One."

"Glad to be here, sir."

"How are you feeling, Commander?"

"Fine now, Wesley."

Captain Picard sat down beside him.

"Mr Worf, inform the colony on Gamma Librae VII that there will be no further delay and we will be there within the next six hours."

"Aye, sir."

"Ensign, plot a course for our original destination. Warp factor eight."

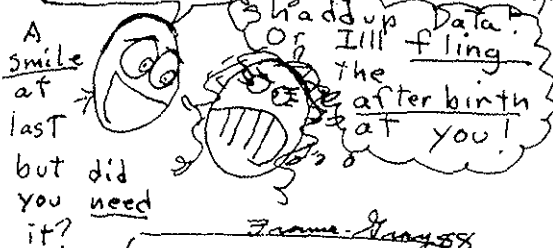
"Course laid in for Gamma Librae VII, sir. Warp factor eight," replied Ensign Crusher from his place at Conn.

With the familiar sweep of his arm, Captain Picard said, "Engage."



"The Child" Revisted

Gee... How much are the contractions apart now? How does it feel? Does it hurt? what are you going to name the child? what shall you do if there is more than one? Your career...



"The Birth"

SURVIVAL

by

Gail Christison

Tasha Yar watched with Will Riker as Captain Picard and his away team materialized on the transporter platform.

Picard looked thunderous.

"Captain - " Riker greeted him carefully.

"Lt. Yar. My ready room. Fifteen minutes," ordered Picard in a controlled tone that Yar recognised as one he used to mask extreme displeasure. She watched him stride out the door with the Commander, then looked back at her people. They did not have to be asked.

"I'm sorry, Lt. Yar. It wasn't mentioned at the briefing. We didn't know," Tepr, a very young junior grade lieutenant confessed.

"What didn't you know, Tepy?" asked Yar. "I told Commander Riker that you and Shelley were among my best people."

"We're sorry, Lieutenant," added Shelley Aames, "but even holodeck exercises couldn't prepare anyone for Peras IV."

"You are supposed to be prepared for any eventuality," snapped Yar. "That's your job. I want to know exactly what happened, before I face the Captain."

Tepr blinked his large, round eyes and looked up at her dolefully. "We arrived without complication and Captain Picard met with the delegates in their field encampment - "

"Lord Baragades offered to let us - Tepy and me - go with his troops on a patrol. Captain Picard accepted, y'know, to be diplomatic, and then Tepy made a nice little speech about how Commander Riker would kill us if we left Captain Picard on his own, that it just wasn't protocol. It worked. Tepy volunteered to stay, and I went with the patrol," Aames continued. "It was supposed to be a nice easy ride through the local terrain, nowhere near the front, or the Argesse encampment, checking for signs of game."

"Game?" asked Yar. "You mean as in animals, to eat?"

Aames nodded uncomfortably. "They're beautiful creatures. We found a herd about ten kilometres from the Baragades encampment. The seven of us left our beasts tied up and climbed a big rock overhang so we could look down at them, and still be close enough for the soldiers to use their weapons. It was so hot and the insects were so bad..." Aames said forlornly. Yar waited patiently. "Something bit me, hard. And there were so many flying things around my face because of the sweat, I honestly didn't see the thing."

"Shelley?" prompted Yar softly.

"Lieutenant? Oh. A shrill-plant. I trod on it. It's a pre-intelligent, well-plant. A blue-

green, rosette-shaped, squashy thing. It squealed for about ten minutes. I've never heard anything like it. And that was the end of the hunt. The lorells scattered within seconds."

"And this violated some important taboo?" guessed Yar.

Tepr shook his furry brown head. "It meant that Lord Baragades had no meal to present to Captain Picard, and no meat for the camp that night. They needed at least eighteen lorells just for the soldiers. The talks have been delayed until a proper ceremonial meal can be provided for Captain Picard. That meant that the Captain had to convince Prince Argesse to delay his summit to accommodate Lord Baragades, who really is a bad tempered being," the Saphr concluded in his usual matter-of-fact fashion.

Yar's eyes had closed slowly during Tepr's summation. They opened now. "Shelley, what was so difficult about dealing with a few insects?" she asked shortly.

Aames seemed to be unaffected by Yar's tone this time. She raised her eyes to the lieutenant's.

"I was born in space, Lieutenant. I didn't see a planet until I was eleven. I didn't leave the research station until I was fourteen. And the last thing programmers bother about, with the volume of planetary simulations the Academy needs, is insects. They do the sounds, sometimes even lepidoptera analog or even a few spiders or analogues, just for looks, but I've never been bitten like that, or had bugs crawling all over my face, in any simulation."

Yar shook her head. "You two had better go and get cleaned up. We'll finish this discussion later," she told them, and left, lengthening her stride considerably once the doors closed. She would have to hurry to get to the Captain's ready room on time...

Captain Picard was standing by the viewport looking down at Peras IV when Yar came into the room. She stood silently at his desk and waited for him to turn.

Picard spoke slowly and without turning. "Commander Riker spoke of Lt. Tepr and Ensign Aames as being among the best of my Security personnel."

"That was my assessment, sir. I have no cause to change that opinion. It was my fault that the incident occurred."

Picard turned. "I don't understand," he said, surprised.

"Insects, sir. Did they trouble you on Peras?"

"They certainly did," he said emphatically. "I thought at one stage that they were going to carry me away."

"Ensign Aames has never lived on a planet, sir."

It was Picard's turn to close his eyes. A moment later he opened them again. "How could such a simple thing be overlooked?" he asked quietly.

"Perhaps because it is so simple, sir. Ensign Aames tells me that even Academy Holo-exercises no longer routinely contain a realistic simulation of resident insect populations."

"Unacceptable," Picard said forcefully. "And ludicrous. You will draft a report, which I will countersign, to Starfleet Command, to address the issue and hopefully force some changes. In the meantime we must ensure that nothing like this happens again."

"I agree, sir. But first, I'd like to volunteer for away team duties on Peras until the treaty is signed."

"Accepted, willingly, Lieutenant. Although I continue to fully endorse your idea of allowing the junior members of your section to gain experience in what should have been a relatively safe situation. And now that the reason for Ensign Aames' unfortunate faux pas has been revealed I don't think further action is warranted. The Ensign's resultant discomfiture was punishment enough. Use the holodeck, commandeer time if necessary, but make certain that incidents like this one do not occur again."

Yar nodded, then frowned. "Captain, I don't want to use the holodeck. No matter how good the simulation, it's still a controlled environment. They know that they're safe. There's no jeopardy, no true test of their survival skills. When I was at the Academy, and for that matter even when Worf was there, a survival exercise in a real environment was a matter of course. Without real risk it's not a survival course - it's just another simulation."

"And without risk, one of the most important learning tools for a Starfleet officer is missing," added Picard thoughtfully. "I understand, Lieutenant. The question is, what to do about it?"

"We have some down time after this mission. I'd like to take a selected team to a suitable planet and take them through a survival exercise. That is, with your approval, sir."

"Give me some time think about it, Tasha. There are a lot of things to consider in a project like that, including mishaps."

"Like today's, Captain?" asked Yar dryly.

Picard's hazel eyes suddenly gleamed with amusement. "Touche," he said, and smiled, which had the effect, as it always did, of making the colour rush to Yar's pale cheeks. "Transporter room, 0600 hours," he reminded her.

"Aye, sir," grinned Yar and turned.

Picard watched her go, a smile still in his eyes. There was something very special about Tasha Yar, something that touched a part of him that no-one else ever had. He sighed heavily and shook his head. It did no good to dwell on such things...

"How was Peras, today?" Lt. Worf's basso voice rumbled as Yar joined him on the holodeck to work the kinks out in a session of Tai Chi, after the third day in a row of listening to pompous dignitaries telling lies and manipulating each other.

"The same as yesterday and the day before," complained Yar, stretching and limbering up as Worf continued the graceful routine he'd already started.

"I have heard rumours about a survival exercise," Worf told her unexpectedly.

She paused and looked up at him. "I was considering it. Some of my people really need

the experience. Bugs!" she muttered.

"Bugs?" repeated Worf, completing a controlled balance movement.

Yar told him about Aames' misadventure.

"But... The Academy - the Exercises, the holodeck simulations..." countered Worf in genuine surprise.

"Things have changed," Yar told him as she took her place at his side and picked up the routine, moving in sync with the big Klingon. "It seems that the current Academy directors feel that the old survival exercises were an unacceptable risk, so all of the exercises are now done on holodecks."

Worf rolled his eyes in disgust. "A survival exercise is not a game. Its lessons cannot be learned in the comfort of a holodeck," he stated.

"Exactly," agreed Yar, enjoying the flowing serenity of their movements and the company of a friend. "So, you want in?" she asked, grinning.

Worf rolled his eyes again. "Of course," he growled and slid a sideways glance at the Human, who was still smiling. "Who will you take?"

"Aames, Bartels, Coulson, Schober, Shastri... all the kids. And Tepy for his experience."

"Unless you choose an ice world, a survival exercise should pose few problems for Lt. Tepy. Sapheryx is not known for its hospitable environment."

"Exactly," said Yar, balancing on one leg and turning her other limbs gracefully through the movement with the Klingon. "They need someone to talk to, someone who won't be too preoccupied with the exercise, to go to with their fears, doubts, even mistakes. Since they can't come to me, and they're all terrified of you - " She turned her face slightly so that she could see Worf's expression out of the corner of her eye. It was difficult not to giggle at the smug look on his face. "It'll be good experience for Tepy, give him a chance to develop some leadership skills."

They completed Worf's Tai Chi routine.

"Computer, combat simulation, jiu-jitsu," ordered Worf, while they were still warm.

Tasha watched him as he spoke and wondered, not for the first time, how she had come to change so very much over the years. In his white exercise costume, with its jacket fallen open during the warm up, Worf was an extraordinarily intimidating, powerfully masculine figure; the kind that once would have frozen her with terror. Yet, despite all his pretext of Klingon ferocity, there were few people on the ship that she felt closer to than Worf.

Two ragged, filthy warriors materialised in a preset program, which Yar recognised as one of hers, a simulation of her home world created as a reminder of just how far she had come from that terrible past. Eerie, the way the computer had chosen that particular scenario out of a possible dozen or so...

Worf paused, turning with a silent question in his eyes.

Tasha understood. She nodded, and smiled at him.

"Run program. Level three," ordered Worf, satisfied. They set themselves.

The battle was brutal and unforgiving. Even though the simulants were programmed only for jiu-jitsu combat, they were part of a re-creation of a world that knew only viciousness, deceit and violence. After the first two, Worf and Yar faced gangs, individuals who cheated, others who attempted to lead them into traps, force them off the top of ruined buildings, and for which there were no failsafes but the mandatory mortality one. Anything else would have been beneath Worf's dignity.

"Worf!" cried Yar as two more men dropped from a fire exit to land behind him. The lane was dank and dark and foul smelling. Tasha shivered. It was almost too real.

Worf dispatched the pair impressively, too impressively. The computer obligingly adjusted the difficulty factor. Yar leaped to his side as the alley was cut off at both ends by large, menacing figures. Six of them.

The pair moved back to back as the gangs advanced.

"Is this fun?" asked Yar dryly, raising her arms defensively.

"Yes," growled Worf, launching a flying kick at his over-eager assailant.

The simulant slammed into a wall as the others closed in. Yar had put one down and was struggling with another by the time Worf turned, not quickly enough to prevent the third from launching a blow at her head which Yar only managed to partially deflect as she continued to grapple with the other.

Worf lunged as she went down, formal martial arts forgotten as he sent the simulants sprawling with blows that to any mortal would have been well and truly fatal.

"Computer, freeze program," he commanded, dropping to Yar's side. He lifted the fair head with surprising gentleness, drew a sharp breath at the trickle of red blood running through her hair to her ear.

"Tasha?" he said, feeling the strong pulse at her throat, the warm breath on the fingers of his other hand as he touched a grazed cheek.

"What hit me?" groaned Yar, her voice halting Worf's hand millimetres from his communicator, as he held her head in the crook of his other arm.

"One of your honourless simulants," he growled, moving the hair from her wound. "The wound is small, but you will have to go to sickbay."

Yar looked up at her friend through concussion-blurred eyes, her head throbbing dreadfully. In all the months they had worked and trained together they had never been this close to one another. She could see the strain in his face, the unaccustomed worry in his eyes.

Impulsively she reached up and touched his face. "I'll be all right," she said softly.

If he was surprised it didn't show. His mouth softened into a near smile. "Good," he said brusquely. "I would not want to have to explain to the Captain."

Yar laughed, winced with pain and looked up at him again. His face was not as fuzzy now. "Don't make me laugh, Worf. It hurts... and don't tell me that warriors don't care about

pain. You're not the one who's suffering!" she added good naturedly.

Worf's mouth set in a hard line again, but this time it was a controlling line, an effort to resist an unaccustomed emotion.

Yar saw the tension in his jaw, felt it in his arm, and smiled inwardly at his concern before groaning involuntarily. Her head was worse. She moved slightly in his arm, turning her head so that it rested against his chest, and closed her eyes.

She did not feel the tremor that went through the Klingon's body as he tapped his communicator or his strength as he lifted her into his arms and strode across the holodeck.

"Computer, end program. Exit, now. Sickbay!" he added.

"Sickbay," replied Beverly Crusher's inquiring voice as he strode down the corridor and stepped into an open turbolift.

"Lt. Yar has received a head wound during a callisthenics program on the holodeck. She has lost consciousness."

"Where are you now, Worf?"

"On my way to sickbay," he replied tersely.

"We'll be standing by," replied Crusher, unable to disguise the concern in her voice.

Tasha Yar stirred from what seemed to be a deep, restful sleep. She blinked. Sickbay. Slowly, she put the pieces together. Beverly Crusher smiled at her.

"Hi," she said. "How's your head?"

"It's stopped hurting." Yar was surprised. She grinned. "You do good work."

"It wasn't much. You were concussed and there was some superficial tissue damage, but nothing too serious."

"Good." Yar raised herself up on an elbow and looked around. "Where's Worf?"

"He didn't stay." It was all Crusher needed to say. "You've been here about four hours. I let you sleep until I was certain the headache would be gone," she went on.

Yar nodded and slid off the bed, seemingly smaller in her bare feet and loose martial arts costume.

"Tasha, don't do anything strenuous until your next watch," warned Crusher.

Yar smiled at her. "Don't worry," she said as her muscles complained loudly about their recent abuse. "I won't."

Crusher watched her go and wondered gloomily how many more times she would have to treat either one or both of them after one of their infamous exercise programs...

When Yar was summoned to the Captain's ready room during her off-duty at the conclusion of the Peras IV assignment, she was certain that Picard was going to refuse her request. After all, it was dangerous and there were attendant risks, and the Captain had a jealous regard for the lives of all those in his crew.

Picard was not alone. Will Riker was at the view port and Worf was standing by the aquarium.

"You wanted to see me, sir?" asked Yar, more as a matter of form than necessity.

"Sit down, Tasha," Picard told her. Yar looked to each of the others before taking the chair, then returned her attention to the Captain.

"Commander Riker is here at my invitation. He has some concerns about your plans."

"And since Worf was mentioned in your recommendations I've asked him to join the discussion," added Riker.

Yar nodded. "I expected some concern. We're not talking about shore leave on Argelius. Trobius is a dry world in a red sun system. It's uninhabited, but there are marginal areas that support vegetation and lower life forms. It won't be very forgiving and they'll have to work hard. That's what I wanted. The records show that each of the people I've selected, with the exception of Lt. Worf and Lt. Tepr, have little or no experience in primitive or completely uncontrolled environments. If we want to avoid a repeat of the incident with Ensign Aames I believe this is the only answer."

"You may be right, Tasha, but you're talking about putting a bunch of kids into a front line situation without adequate back-up. I'm sorry, but I have trouble with that kind of risk when it involves members of my crew." Riker told her, his blue eyes including her in that number.

"None of them are children, Commander," she told him firmly. "Actually Tepy - Lt. Tepr - is older than you are, sir."

Riker grinned. "I wish. The Sapherian year is only about nine Terran months. Tepy is only about twenty-seven Earth years old."

"They're good officers. They can handle the exercise. It's what could happen in the future if we don't do something now that concerns me," Yar told them. "My senior staff can handle any problems that come up in our absence. Meg Millar and Rique Vasquez have enough experience between them to account for the whole course, and that's including Worf, and me," Yar told the First Officer.

"Indeed," said Picard. "Lt. Vasquez would be my first choice to head the department in your absence. And Lt. Millar is an exemplary tactical officer whose presence on the top watch will very welcome."

Yar exchanged grins with Riker. "It sounds as though I'm not exactly indispensable," she replied ruefully.

"On the contrary," said Picard in a tone the softness of which belied the strength of conviction in his voice.

"Worf, we haven't heard your opinion of this venture?" Riker brought them back to the

point.

The Klingon came to stand behind Yar's chair. "Every away team mission entails a degree of risk. Minimising those risks would seem to be a valid course of action. The survival course I completed at the Academy was an invaluable learning experience for those involved. It quickly became apparent that those whose Academic prowess had previously set them apart were no more prepared than the others for the challenge of survival. The dux of my class - a Human - had to be stretchered on a travois for the last three days of the course," he finished in a disapproving tone.

Riker and Yar smiled and Picard's eyes glinted with amusement as he turned to Tasha.

"I will give you two weeks on Trobius. Worf will be released from bridge duties so that he can accompany you. Mr. Worf, you will attend this project in a supervisory capacity - "

"In other words, a baby sitter," Riker told him, blue eyes dancing.

"A baby sitter?" said Worf, alarmed.

"The Captain means that he is entrusting you with the overall safety of Lt. Yar and her team," explained Riker, smiling widely.

Appeased, Worf nodded. "I understand. I will do my best."

"Then it's settled," concluded Picard. "We will reach Trobius in thirty hours. Have your team prepared and briefed by then, Lieutenant. We will beam you down to your chosen site before continuing to Starbase 205 for the upgrades Chief Argyll has requested and then to Pacifica for the crew's shore leave."

"Captain, I'm not sure it's such a good idea to be out of contact with Lt. Yar's team for that length of time," Riker said doubtfully.

Picard nodded. "I don't particularly like it myself, Number One, but if we are going to sanction this training at all, then it must be accepted for what it is: a survival course," he said quietly.

"No safety net..." mused Riker sombrely.

"No safety net," repeated Yar emphatically.

Picard looked from one to the other. "I think our business is concluded. Dismissed, everyone," he told them all.

When they had gone Picard leaned an elbow on his desk and rested his head in his palm. Will Riker would never know how accurately he had reflected his personal feelings about the exercise.

A moment later he lifted his head and activated the intercom. "Commander Data, report to my ready room."

Tasha Yar squinted up at the red sun of Trobius, then slowly looked around at the area she had selected for the beginning of the exercise.

There were no trees in sight, only red sandstone cliffs rising out of equally red rolling plains. A few succulents and grasses, and the occasional fine-leaved bush dotted the ground, adding small splashes of blue, green and pale gold to the relentless orange-redness of the landscape. She turned to the others.

"Welcome to Trobius," she said dryly. "This is almost as good as it gets. You've been briefed on edible and toxic vegetation, the fauna and insects, so I won't repeat myself. The dangers, however, cannot be too highly emphasised. Remember, there are several very dangerous predators and six violently toxic insect and arachnid species which you must be constantly on the look out for. Look for shade at all times and note any potential shelter for later use. Don't move about too much in the two hours before noon and the four hours afterward. In this part of the continent the temperature at that time never falls below 48 degrees celsius. Our objective is to reach Mount Obak by the conclusion of the exercise, an ambitious but not impossible distance, given that you all work to your abilities and nothing goes wrong. You all know that the Enterprise has gone on to Starbase 205 and then to scheduled shore leave on Pacifica. It will not return for eleven days. Each of you is equipped with a field kit which includes a small medikit. Lt. Worf will be carrying a surgeon's kit and Dr. Crusher has provided a full hypospray array which I will be carrying. You need to know this, because if anything happens to either of us, one of you must retrieve this equipment, if possible, before continuing."

"The rest of the supplies have been divided among the whole team," Worf continued at Yar's signal. "To refresh your memories before we begin: Ensign Shastri carries the emergency beacon and the reserve water supply; Ensign Aames carries the sleeping modules, Ensigns Schober and Bartels the tools for cutting, digging and camp building; and Lieutenants Coulson and Tepr have charge of the additional lights plus the back-up navigation equipment and emergency beacon. In this way the loss of any one person will not critically compromise the mission," he said matter of factly, eliciting a mixture of worried and vexed looks from the group of junior officers who, although aware that for this mission at least Worf outranked even the other two junior grade lieutenants, resented the casual approach to the question of casualties.

"All right, everyone. Enough talk," Yar broke in fortuitously without looking up from the bearing on her tricorder. "Let's go."

The temperature rose gradually from the relatively comfortable 32 degrees celsius of their arrival to an oppressive 44 degrees by the designated resting time.

Worf, at the point, halted the team. For the last forty minutes he had been visually scouring the landscape for shelter from the heat and now, finally, he had seen something.

"A cave?" Yar asked from the rear of the group.

Worf shook his head. "Only a recess in the rock face. Not very deep, but it will provide shelter."

"Anything to get out of this heat for a while," muttered Jeff Coulson.

"It is not that bad," Vijay Shastri cajoled. "I come from an area like this."

"In India?" asked Schober conversationally.

"No," laughed the dark-eyed Ensign. "Australia. A place called Coober Pedy."

The shallow cavern was surprisingly clean, and blissfully cool. Everyone, by mutual consent, made as much free space between individuals as possible as they sat down in the red dust and shed their heavy loads.

"Twenty-eight degrees," said Tepr, who had been placed in charge of the tricorder. "Better?" he asked, showing no residual effects of their burdened march in the heat.

A sweat-drenched Shelley Aames grinned at him. "Sure it is. You haven't even started to warm up yet, have you, Tepr?"

The Saphr smiled, showing his double rows of gleaming teeth. "Warm, yes. A comfortable planet," he summed up whimsically. Several of the group laughed quietly.

"Lt. Yar, if we're going to be here for six hours, shouldn't we try to sleep?" asked Jed Bartels. "We will be travelling more by night, won't we?"

"What do you think?" Tasha turned the question back. "Anyone else?" she added.

"Conservation of energy is a good idea," offered Schober, "but too many hungry things with big teeth roam this place after dark. I'd just as soon spend a couple more hours in the heat than become a midnight snack for a wild animal."

"Jed?" inquired Yar quietly.

"I'm with Schober," he said sheepishly. "I'm sorry, Lieutenant. The nocturnal hunters were mentioned during the shipboard briefing. I should have remembered."

"Yes, you should," growled Worf. "Remember, and live."

"Count on it," replied Bartels without thinking. "- sir," he added when Worf's perpetual scowl deepened by several factors.

"Everybody rest. Eat your midday ration and drink what you need. I don't want anybody dehydrated. It doesn't matter whether you sleep or not. We'll try and make at least another twenty-five kilometres by nightfall. Lt. Worf will take the point with his phaser at dusk until we find a suitable, safe campsite."

The hours immediately after they emerged from their shelter were only marginally more comfortable than the earlier inferno. The temperature dropped very slowly as they made their way through the relatively flat but ever rising country that ran from the mountains in the northwest, to the desert in the south and east.

Tepr and Aames took the point, walking together in the comfortable silence of friends, while Bartels, Coulson and Schober made a straggling line behind them, with Shastri, Yar and Worf bringing up the rear.

Yar and Shastri had begun a spirited discussion on the merits or otherwise of living underground, a tradition in Vijay's Australian home town. Worf had avoided the discussion. In his opinion holes were for small, burrowing animals and Horta's, not warriors... His eyes were for their surroundings, scanning regularly for signs of trouble, as (he noticed with some satisfaction) did most of the others, regardless of their current preoccupation.

They travelled at a good pace, relatively untroubled but for the heat and the inevitable insects attracted by the moisture in their sweat, for several hours until the sun sat itself on the horizon like a dowager clothed in flowing red, orange and gold finery.

Worf moved to the point and the procession closed up to form a neat rectangle of bodies travelling slowly and wearily along a ridge line, the ascent of which had taken most of their remaining energy. A breeze had sprung up, cool against their sweat-drenched faces and bodies. Yar moved up alongside the Klingon, and Tepr fell back to the rear to take her place.

"Worf, I haven't seen anything that would provide shelter yet. Also there's something pacing us off to the right. I don't think it's very big, but it's been with us for the last half hour.

"I know," replied Worf. "It is a scavenger. It presents no danger."

Yar's smile was barely visible in the last light of dusk. "Thanks," she said softly.

"For what?"

"Just... thanks," she replied, and heard his sigh of resignation.

A cry of pain and some creative swearing stopped everyone in their tracks. Worf handed his phaser to Yar and went back to investigate.

"What happened?" he demanded. Bartels was sitting on the ground holding his ankle.

"Sir, I wish to report that I have discovered a hole in the track," muttered Bartels through his teeth, obviously in pain.

Worf bent to study the ground. "A rodent's burrow," he concluded, despite the lengthening shadows. "Can you stand?"

Bartels made an effort to rise and let out another yell. Coulson and Schober grabbed his arms to steady him as he balanced on one leg.

"Apparently not," he told the Klingon wryly. "I don't think this was in the briefing," he added lightly, though his voice wavered a little as he spoke.

"Mr. Shastri, take the point with Lt. Yar. I will assist Ensign Bartels, or we will be here all night."

"My lucky day," muttered Bartels in a voice low enough that only Aames heard and almost choked trying not to laugh.

"All right, people, we're running out of light. Let's move," ordered a concerned Yar. "Use your lights. I don't want any more accidents. Worf, Bartels, stay right in the centre where the others can cover your back and help if it's needed. OK. Let's go."

They had only gone a couple of hundred paces when the peaceful, quiet dusk was shaken by a thundering tremor. Yar flicked her light from side to side looking for refuge, but the cliffs, the rocks represented only danger. Close to her elbow, Shastri steadied her as the shaking grew more violent.

"We are safer here, Lieutenant," he yelled over the roar of the quake. Yar nodded.

"Down!" she turned back and yelled at the waiting group, motioning downwards.

Before they could move the ground shuddered violently at their feet, a sickening rumbling sound boiling up out of the earth as though fighting its way to the surface. There was a scream as the ground tore open.

"Vijay!" cried Yar.

"No!" shouted Worf as she threw herself after the boy. He released Bartels roughly and flew to where Yar had disappeared, the others in hot pursuit as the shaking and the noise subsided slowly.

Worf's heart was pounding in his ears as he looked over the edge of the fissure that had opened up. By the glare of Aames' and Coulson's lights he could see Shastri clinging to the enormously long, trailing roots of one of the small bushes. And, about four feet above the boy, Worf saw Yar stretching down over a jagged ledge, balancing on the top of her thighs, and edging ever further downward.

"Tasha!" he shouted.

"I can't reach!" she shouted back. "Hang on, Vijay. Just a little bit longer. Someone can hold my feet - then I'll be able to - " The ground roared and heaved again and someone screamed.

Worf went over the edge to secure Tasha and saw her lunge wildly as the roots broke away and Shastri was lost, his last cry echoing back up the deadly chasm. The Klingon's giant hand closed around Yar's disappearing boot milliseconds before she, too, would have slid to her death. He hauled her back onto the ledge like a sack of potatoes and clamped an arm around her before climbing the five or six feet back up to the others.

When they reached the top he did not let go. The others had all moved away from the edge and now sat huddled around Bartels in the darkness. He felt Yar's weight rest against him and the trembling of her body, but she remained silent. Wordlessly he allowed his arms to close around her, holding her in their tight, protective circle until her shaking subsided. Yar did not weep, only slid her arms gratefully around him and held tight, as if she could borrow some of his strength, his control. But in the end all she could find the strength to do was to listen to the sound of his ragged breath and the pounding of his heart. In a little while she drew away, only her hair visible in the darkness that now enveloped them all.

"Lights!" growled Worf. Several were obediently flicked on. Yar's face was deathly white, and the other Humans seemed in little better condition. Tepr sat with his eyes closed and his hands locked over his head, a position of extreme anxiety for a Saphr. Worf turned and flashed his light up and down the chasm. It was too wide to jump and it ran out of sight both ways.

"Tepr," Yar spoke at last, her eyes tearing away from their mesmeric observation of Worf's light. "You were a geologist. How far is this fissure likely to run?"

"Depends," Tepr said without opening his eyes. "Sometimes only a few kilometres, if it is a localised weakness, sometimes as far as the fault line stretches on land - perhaps thousands of miles..."

"Then we may have to make camp on this side tonight," she said slowly. "Worf, stay with the others. Tepr, come with me and bring the tricorder and your phaser. Coulson, I need

a phaser. I - I seem to have lost all my gear." Yar's tone faltered momentarily and they heard her indrawn breath as another aftershock rumbled beneath their feet. "If we are not back in an hour, you'd better set up camp here and look for us in the morning," she finished firmly.

Worf did not protest as the pair disappeared into the darkness. That one of them had to go was inevitable. Either way he could not protect her...

In forty-five minutes Yar and Tepr were back with the news that the fissure was passable just a kilometre away and that there was a place nearby to spend the night.

The modules took just moments to extend to full size from shirt box portability, after they were activated. Only three were raised, Bartels choosing to move into Coulson and Schober's unit rather than spend the night alone. They were arranged in a close circle, exits all facing inward. As sealed, indestructible units they provided ideal emergency cover but Worf nevertheless worked out a picket schedule for the night, the possibility of further aftershocks firmly in mind.

When he returned after completing the first picket himself, Yar was still awake and her light was still burning, as she sat silently in the corner of the module with a thermal sheet drawn around her against the rising cold of the night.

He moved silently to his own bed roll and unfolded the handkerchief sized package that became his thermal sheet. When he was ready to rest he looked at her again. She had been watching him.

Worf watched Yar smile a little, but there was no life in her face, her eyes.

"Did you do something about Jed's foot?" she asked in a flat voice.

He nodded. "The swelling should be gone by morning. Ensign Schober will administer painkillers and anti-inflammatory medication during the night. Lt. Coulson has relieved me on picket duty."

"Good," said Yar vaguely. Worf frowned at her paleness, her withdrawal.

"Do not blame yourself for what happened. Even the routine planetary scans by the Enterprise did not reveal the possibility of such an event," he told her brusquely.

Yar's blue-green eyes focused on his then. "Vijay is dead, Worf. I don't give a damn about science reports now. A man is dead and it's my fault. If I had left you at point you would have reached him. You would have saved him," she said plaintively, her voice cracking.

"It is more likely that the last tremor would have sent us both to our deaths, had I reached him. Worse, you might have come after me and tried to do as I did, in which case our combined weight would also have dragged you from the cliff," said Worf slowly and pointedly as he wrapped himself in his sheet and stretched out.

"Goodnight," she said hollowly.

"Goodnight," he rumbled, and closed his eyes against the light she had not extinguished.

After a silence that was as deafening as any tempest, Worf heard a tiny sound. His closed eyes clenched for a moment, then opened. The light still burned, and in its glow Tasha Yar wept silent, angry tears.

It brought him pain to see a warrior submit to weakness, but it disturbed the Klingon a great deal more to see Tasha suffer and not know how to help. He made a frustrated sound in his throat and closed his eyes again. A moment later he heard her move and reluctantly raised his head. Yar was standing near the exit, but turned at the slight rustle of his sheet. For a time their gazes held. Then, after a beat, Worf slowly, resignedly, stretched out his arm and extended his hand.

Yar curled up like a child in the hollow of his shoulder and buried her face against his chest. The added thermal sheet and their combined body heat soon brought real warmth, and, with it, welcome drowsiness. And for Yar the surprisingly swift relief of sleep...

It was an intensely Human thing to do, yet despite his initial reluctance Worf found himself comforted by Yar's nearness, and the knowledge that she was safe within his care.

He closed his eyes against another effect of that nearness, one which was also inevitable given his enforced restraint aboard the Enterprise and he found himself admitting, for the first time, his own particular response to this unique woman who was his friend...

For a time he lay awake reviewing those feelings, allowing himself to relax enough to enjoy the closeness and the heady, if fleeting, feeling for once of not being entirely alone. Eventually though, the warmth finally claimed the Klingon and he too fell into a deep sleep.

At dawn they broke camp and marched soberly along the chasm that had claimed their friend's life, until they came to the narrowed area Yar and Tepr had discovered. Beyond, the ridge sloped downward toward another rolling plateau that appeared to offer no more than the previous one had.

Conversation was minimal, morale low. Assessment of their situation over breakfast had revealed several chilling shortfalls, despite the dissemination of essential equipment. They had lost the extra water, plus Yar's and Shastri's personal supply, two sets of rations, the primary emergency beacon, two phasers and the special hypospray kit containing not only normal field supplies but specific antitoxins and antivenoms. There was no panic. Most of the missing equipment was either duplicated or backed up in the remaining supplies. Water, however, had become the new imperative, even above and beyond achieving their destination. Everyone, too, had become acutely aware of their immediate environment, and most especially the unpleasant lifeforms contained in it.

Yar and Worf had gone about their tasks with the same cool, detached efficiency as always, just as they had risen without words, and gone about their routine with not the slightest acknowledgement by either of the previous night.

Worf set a strong pace in the relative cool of dawn, Coulson and Schober helping to keep Jed Bartels moving on his injured ankle. They were followed by Aames and Tepr, and behind them Yar observing everyone, making mental notes and trying hard to prevent her thoughts from slipping back to the previous day.

Of all of them Aames and Tepr seemed the most resilient. Shelley Aames seemed to have some inner agenda, a determination to prove herself. Whatever it was, it gave her an energy and a strength that Coulson, Schober and Bartels could not match.

Tepr, on the other hand, was unaffected by the environment. The Saphr were a desert race whose bodies had evolved with a priority on moisture retention. They did not cry or

sweat or salivate. Their analog to the saliva gland was a pre-digestive stomach above their primary digestive tract. Instead of tears there was a transparent protective lid and a gland which secreted a fine oil in the unlikely event of contact by a foreign object. And instead of sweat their small, muscled bodies contained several very efficient heat dissipation centres: broad, circular patches that were startlingly visible through infra-red scanners.

Yar watched Tepr shrug his disproportionately powerful shoulders in response to a question from Aames and envied his modified uniform, its two bandolero style suspenders not only helping to hold up a pair of stylised uniform trunks, but also boasting his phaser, and displaying his rank insignia near the shoulder. The rest of them were in Starfleet desert fatigues. While the two-part, light-weight costumes provided protection from the sun and other elements, they were still cloying and hot in the searing heat of Trobius.

After a time Tepr dropped back to walk alongside Yar.

"Lieutenant, are we going to continue to try and reach Mt. Obak, or shall we be concentrating on locating ground water?" he asked, wielding the tricorder.

"Nothing has changed," replied Yar, and felt a tightness in her stomach at the lie. "The objective of this exercise is to reach that mountain, whatever lies between. This is reality, Mr. Tepr. The reason we're here is to make certain that all of you survive any kind of duty situation like this one in the future. We've already proved that the exercise was badly needed," she added more harshly than she'd intended.

"Agreed," he said sadly. "But the cost of the lesson was too high."

It was said without accusation, but the pain went just as deep. "Don't push it, Tepy," she warned grimly.

"Natasha," he said reproachfully. "I do not forget your pain - but it is a fact, however much we are hurting, that Vijay is dead without justifiable cause or meaning." He kicked a stone with some ferocity, then spoke without looking up. "A pointless end," he whispered.

Yar took several minutes to speak. "Of course it was," she said tightly, "but it goes with this job. We are the only people in Starfleet who deliberately put our lives on the line every time we do our job. Everybody wants to die well, but death is death. Ultimately it matters only to those left behind, doesn't it?"

"Yes," agreed the little Saphr. "It matters to us." He blinked and looked down at the tricorder, sweeping it in an arc on both sides of the group.

Yar noted that he stayed silently at her side, and found his continued presence somehow soothing, despite the sharp edge of his clear, uncluttered Sapherian honesty.

When she was able to pull herself away from the tragic waste of Shastri's death, Yar realised that the group had spread out untidily. Worf and Aames had gone ahead, while Bartels' injury and the load he represented had slowed Coulson and Schober considerably.

"Tepy, c'mon. We'll give Karl and Jeff a break," she said briskly.

The overworked pair fell back gratefully to the rear as Yar and Tepr took over, taking turns supporting Bartels as he shuffled uncomplainingly through the dust, his ankle, though much improved by the medication and painkillers, still weak and unable to take his full weight.

Ahead of the others, Shelley Aames was enjoying the rare opportunity to work alongside the Klingon. To the young Ensign most of the bridge crew, including Captain Picard, were only rarely seen names in a crew list, no more real than Riker or La Forge's occasional appearances on the rec deck when everything was quiet. The event of suddenly being pitchforked into working alongside Picard on Peras had been a nerve-racking experience long before the disaster with the shrill-plant. She tore her thoughts from that time to the present.

Worf was not the first Klingon Aames had ever seen, but he was the embodiment of what she intended to be as a Starfleet officer - self-contained, seemingly impervious to outside influence, focused. Worf had made a success of being alone. So could she...

The Klingon had drawn away by several metres by the time Aames shook herself out of her silent reverie. She increased her stride to catch up, aware that the landscape had changed slightly, cliffs now rising up on both sides of them, the scattered vegetation more concentrated than it had been before.

"Ensign Aames," he was saying as she caught up. "Take the point."

Aames drew her phaser and watched him fall back before assuming the position and focusing her unremarkable brown eyes on the country ahead, searching, scanning, straining all her senses for the first sign of trouble.

"Worf?" Yar handed Bartels back to Tepr as the Klingon fell into step with her.

"It will soon be too hot for them to travel." He looked around at the others. "And we have not yet found shelter. Permission to take Aames on ahead to search for a place to rest? We can move far more quickly, locate shelter and return. I will then carry Lt. Bartels to the new site. The alternative is to risk unnecessary dehydration and the possibility of heatstroke."

"I don't like splitting up, Worf - " began Yar predictably.

"I am aware of the dangers," growled the Klingon. "We will take precautions."

"Be careful..." said Yar stonily.

Worf's eyes met the blue-green ones. After a beat he nodded, and took the tricorder from Tepr before wheeling and striding back to Aames.

"Lt. Tepr, take the point," ordered Yar without taking her eyes off the pair who were doubling off into the distance as if impervious to the heat and the relentlessness of the landscape. Then she turned to the others. "On the alert, you two. Coulson, come and help Jedi. Schober, guard the rear."

Relieved of Bartel's weight, Yar flexed her shoulders and moved up alongside the Saphr. "What does your sixth sense tell you now, Tepy?" she asked as they trudged on.

He smiled up at her. It was a running joke in the section. Tepr's combination of finely honed natural senses and lightning reflexes had given him a mostly undeserved reputation for precognition.

"Common sense tells me that all will be well. Shelley will not fail the Lieutenant. Besides, what beast would have the poor sense to challenge Worf?" he pointed out, and succeeded in bringing a smile to worried lips.

"You have that much confidence in Aames?"

Tepr nodded. "Shelley has that something that makes leaders. She has learned much from the mistake at Peras, and Worf's respect is very important to her."

"I know," said Yar. "They've never said two words to one another, yet everyone knows she'd walk out an airlock without a suit if he told her to."

"Love?" inquired Tepr curiously.

Yar shook her head. "Empathy, maybe. They're too much alike, and love is too much like excess baggage for either of them to waste time with," she concluded, an edge in her voice.

Tepr looked up at her curiously. "You think Shelley is cold?"

"I didn't say that. I just meant that she has other priorities."

"Ah. And Worf also," he said almost to himself, nodding. Yar watched his glance again swing from left to right and back, before he continued. "Make no mistake though, Natasha. There is fire in both. With those two, it will always be easy to get burned."

A voice spoke from behind them. "Jeez, Tepy, you sound like that fake fortune teller on Risa. You know, the one that took all your money -"

"I know the one," Tepr growled. "Human ears are far too large. And I do not sound like her. She was a harpy," he said disapprovingly.

"You wouldn't know a harpy if it bit you, Tepy," retorted Bartels.

"A supposedly mythological creature from your planet," Tepr responded smugly. "Perhaps ancestors of yours?" he inquired innocently over his shoulder.

Guffaws from Coulson and Schober silenced the young man and widened Tepr's grin as his eyes continued to scan the horizon.

The temperature had risen steadily to 49 degrees celsius as they trudged on, well into the last hour before midday. The heat was taking its toll on Bartels and Schober. The fair haired Schober had not revived as the others had after a pause to take a drink and something to eat. He'd declined rapidly to the point where he was just managing to place one foot in front of the other. Yar scoured the cliffs for any sign of the Klingon.

Where were they...?

Aames' muscles screamed but she forced her slender body to keep pace with the Klingon, who strode on relentlessly, scanning with the tricorder while she raked the horizon visually, searching for a place of safety for the team.

"Half an hour more," the Klingon said over his shoulder. "If we are unsuccessful, we will have to return to the others and set up the modules at the base of one of the cliffs."

The Ensign pushed herself to draw level with him. "Sir, they'll act like ovens. We have to find something here!" she said urgently.

Worf nodded pessimistic agreement and turned arbitrarily to the cliffs on the right. They climbed up along the rough base looking for caves or hollows but the red walls were unbroken.

Another fifteen minutes passed before Worf suddenly stopped.

Aames held her breath as he checked his readings. When he moved she followed him around a great pile of boulders that might have been the remnants of a landslide, to a place where a single crack wended its way up the cliff. Before Aames could even frame a question, Worf had drawn and reset his phaser. He blasted the crack, leaving a neat hole in the wall.

"What's behind there?" she finally managed to ask.

"A large cavity. Possibly moisture. Detailed readings are indeterminate, possibly due to interference from minerals in the rock," he told her, already climbing toward the new opening.

There was a vague staleness about the air at the opening as they turned on their hand lights and peered into the darkness.

The cavern was narrow and dank. That there was moisture was certain, that it might be useful was questionable. They had not been as lucky as before. Instead of a sandy floor, there was only rough volcanic rock, much of it slippery with some kind of lichen or moss, and insects skittered across the roof.

"It will have to suffice," declared Worf and turned off his light.

Aames was already making her way down the incline when Worf emerged from the caves, frustrated by the erratic tricorder readings and preoccupied by one vaguely disturbing reading, the identification of the signature of which eluded him.

He caught the Ensign up easily, mildly surprised at her stamina until he saw her face and the real toll keeping up with him was taking. Aames said nothing as he fell in beside her.

"It would be wiser for you to remain in the shelter of the cave while I go to inform the others," he told her.

Aames shook her head. "Respectfully beg to disagree," she said forcefully. "Travelling unaccompanied in this country is dangerous. And you don't know what condition the others will be in when you find them. You can't carry them all - sir."

"You have a great deal to say for someone so... small," he muttered.

"I wouldn't be doing my job if I didn't at least say the words," she replied with more bravura than she felt.

"We are wasting time," he growled after a tense pause.

Aames followed without complaint and when Worf suddenly accelerated, did the same, aware that it was well past the noon hour and that the temperature was becoming difficult even for him to deal with physically.

The Klingon flicked a glance at his companion as they strode across the miserable terrain, wishing for a moment that he'd chosen Tepy instead. But Tepy was where Worf wanted him: supporting Tasha.

And, the Klingon told himself, the young Ensign was performing admirably, for a child...

A couple of kilometres from the team Aames finally spoke. "I have to stop for water," she panted between laboured breaths.

Worf nodded, his keen eyes taking in the pinched face and dull eyes. "You are already dehydrated," he said disapprovingly.

Aames looked up from her drink, distress for the first time showing in her face. "I'm sorry, sir. I'll be all right now. The water will help. We have to get back to the others," she told him a calm voice, slid the water container back into her pack and started in the direction of the others.

For several moments Worf watched, stone-faced, the small signs of the extent of her struggle as she picked her way through the rough, rocky terrain, before swiftly catching her up.

Yar had moved the group into the shadow of the cliffs, despite the lack of substantial improvement in temperature. No breath of air blew to cool them, nor had the rocks in the shaded lee of the cliff had time to cool. Schober was worse. His normally prominent nose now seemed to dominate his sunken face and eyes. While all the others had attended to various personal needs and gradually fallen into conversation, or dozed off, he had not the slightest inclination to do so, instead sitting hunched miserably against the elements and his dehydration.

Yar poured water from the young man's relatively full canteen into a cup and took it to him, realising immediately she picked it up what had happened.

"Karl, I want you to drink this. I know it seems like a good idea to ration your water so that it will last longer, but it doesn't work that way. The rest of that water won't do you - or us any good if you get heatstroke, or go crazy, or even go into shock, through dehydration," she told him.

"I know," he said sullenly. "I know the drill. I just thought... Well, I thought I could handle it. I thought I was helping."

"I understand," she said softly. "But I don't want to lose you, and I will if you keep cutting your water ration. When was the last time you took your salt caps?"

"I was skipping, but I started taking them again this morning."

Yar poured another cup and regarded him severely. "No wonder you look so awful. A few more hours of this and you would have gone into shock. Drink this slowly and then rest as much as you can. When Lt. Worf gets back we'll be moving fairly quickly to get out of the sun, and he can't carry both of you," she told him, cocking her head toward Bartels.

"I'll be fine," insisted Schober shakily. "I never enjoyed any two drinks so much in my life," he added, and finished the cup.

"You've still only replaced less than half a litre. You're going to need more. We're all going to need more," said Yar, almost to herself.

"Lt. Yar!" yelled Coulson, who was the current look-out, from his perch on a shaded boulder. "They're coming."

Schober watched Yar close her eyes for a moment and saw the relief she couldn't hide. Then she was on her feet and striding towards Coulson's lookout. Tepr rose from a conversation with a sweat-drenched Bartels and followed.

Worf appeared, guiding a disoriented, dehydrated Shelley Aames.

"Tepy, take Ensign Aames into the shade. She requires fluids and rest," Worf told the small alien and handed the girl swiftly to him.

"What happened?" asked Yar resignedly.

Worf looked at Yar's sweat plastered hair and drenched clothes and thanked the fates that Dr. Crusher had been able to convince her that the one-off U.V. protection shots for everyone were essential on planets like Trobius, survival exercise or no survival exercise.

"We have found a cave, and moisture. We do not yet know if it will be productive," he admitted. "The tricorder did not function well close to the rocks."

"And Aames?"

"Extraordinary strength and tenacity for a Human so young," observed Worf with unusual candour.

Yar regarded him curiously. "Good," she said. "And you?"

"The heat is considerable," he replied and looked up at the red sun. "We should move as quickly as possible. The cave is four kilometres from here."

Yar nodded and went to organise the others. Therefore she did not see Worf close his eyes and clench his hands as a wave of dizziness and exhaustion overtook him. For several long moments he fought the sensation, then gathered himself and went to join the others.

They moved slowly, trying to follow the line of the cliffs, to stay in the shade despite the difficulties in negotiating the rocky slopes leading up to the red walls.

Bartels had managed to convince Worf that his fireman's carry was not necessary. The party had been slowed enough by the weakened conditions of Schober and Aames for him to make good enough time on foot.

Reaction to the cave was mixed, until they stepped inside. No one was impressed with smell or the skittering sounds of the other tiny inhabitants, but the blissful reduction in temperature, from 56 degrees celsius to a mere 23 degrees well inside, more than compensated for their initial distaste.

As everyone found niches and smooth spots in the rocky floor to rest on, Worf tried the tricorder again.

"Still getting interference?" asked Aames from her damp resting place.

Worf looked up at the unexpected question. "No," he replied, then turned to Yar. "The lichens are not edible, but the white fungus is suitable for consumption by Humans. The water table rises sharply at this point, explaining the moisture. There may once have been a surface water course near here."

"Worf, how can the tricorder be affected by local conditions one minute, and working the next, in the same location?" asked a concerned Yar, rising and coming to his side.

"I do not know. There was significant interference when I scanned the cave before. I do not understand either," he growled and handed the instrument to her.

Yar did a full sweep of the cave and checked the readings. "It's all interconnected. There are kilometres of caves and fissures back there."

"Lieutenant, do you think there'll be any more tremors?" asked Coulson, looking up nervously at the uneven roof of the cavern.

"Lt. Tepr would know more about that than I would, but there don't seem to have been any after-shocks since early this morning," offered Yar. "Tepy?" she added.

Tepr rose and accepted the tricorder, made some adjustments and took readings of their surrounds, then shook his head. "The readings are too distorted. I cannot make an accurate assessment."

Worf stepped forward and took the tricorder roughly. "I do not understand," he growled. "The interference has returned."

"Is there anything in the readings, however distorted, that might account for this?"

Worf shook his head. "When the tricorder was working earlier I scanned the surrounding rock strata. There were no deposits of any material known to cause electromagnetic or any other interference."

"I don't like it," muttered Tasha and looked at her chronometer. "Outside temperature, Worf?"

"Fifty-four degrees celsius," he replied, "if we can trust the reading." He turned off the instrument in disgust.

"It should be dropping faster than that. We may have to stay under cover longer. We need the rest anyway," she told him.

"I will go and verify the accuracy of the reading," volunteered Worf and was gone before Yar could reply. He was back in moments. "The temperature has not dropped significantly," he reported, without elaboration.

"Then we wait," decided Yar, the corner of her mouth lifting at the half-hearted cheer from the others. "If you've all cooled down we'll relax the uniform code in here now. Anybody who wants to take off their shirts, go ahead," she told them, and smiled again at the swiftness with which the supposedly comfortable desert tunics were divested, except for Worf's... and Aames'.

The afternoon passed slowly. The fungi proved quite palatable, almost bread-like in its texture and flavour, and made a change from the hard rations, which were only designed to support them during their adjustment to the new environment anyway.

By late afternoon it had become obvious that it was not going to cool down enough to travel before sunset. Yar reluctantly made the decision to spend the night inside the cave - a decision met with appreciation by Bartels and the slowly reviving Schober. Aames showed little response to the change of plans.

"Tepy, bring the tricorder and come with me," Yar told the Saphr while the others celebrated their extended break from the elements. "Worf, look after them while we find out what's back in those caves. The high water table here could easily mean an underground water course or pool in here somewhere, probably somewhere low - a gathering point."

"I should be the one to go," objected Worf. "You are the senior officer in the party. You should not place yourself at unnecessary risk - again," he told her emphatically.

Yar shook her head. Worf might have had a point, but there was no way she was going to sit around waiting and worrying... "That's an order, Lieutenant. Tepy can get us back out even if the tricorder fails. Give us two hours," she added as they disappeared down the narrowing fissure, only the swinging of their lights marking their progress, until they were out of sight.

Aames watched Worf as he stood statue-like, staring into the darkness. Several seconds passed before he turned and picked his way through rocks and bodies to the narrow entrance to their cavern. For a moment she thought that he might actually go outside, but the Klingon had no particular purpose in mind.

For the next two hours she watched him at times stand motionless, the sheer neutrality of his expression advertisement of his worry. At others he would suddenly begin to prow, unable to contain his nervous energy, his instincts, any longer. Then he would sit for a while, staring at the darkness as if it were an enemy he had been prevented by honour from dispatching. As she watched him rise yet again, to walk to the dark opening that had taken Yar and Tepr, Aames shivered and wondered how she could have been so wrong about him.

Yar and Tepr had increased the intensity of their light beams to maximum to penetrate the inky darkness and to help them avoid any further accidents. There was a lot of moisture on the walls of the narrow, twisting fissure.

"You're certain your sense of direction can get us out of here if the tricorder fails?" Yar found herself saying aloud, seeking reassurance as the passage twisted back again about sixty degrees. No plant or insect life seemed to inhabit the deeper recesses, and they seemed to be going ever further downward.

Yar checked her chronometer and discovered that they had been following the tunnel for over an hour. The passage split off into three different directions, one of which ended a couple of metres away. "Any readings?" she asked.

Tepr was already taking readings of the three passages. "Many natural water-eroded fissures and cavities... and many more volcanic ones beyond these. Ah...!" he exclaimed in annoyance, then, "I think we should turn back. The tricorder is malfunctioning again and the random nature of the malfunctions no longer seems so - so -"

"Innocuous?"

"Exactly. Sometimes your language is difficult," he told her. He tapped the instrument. "This makes my sixth sense very unhappy, Natasha," he added with a touch of gallows humour.

Yar frowned. They had nothing to show for their exploration even though it was still their best chance for water. She looked down at the little Saphr, who had never before made such an effort to influence her decision making process.

"What about the water, Tepy? We don't have any tangible danger here, and we'll be giving up the best chance we're probably going to get, of finding some."

Tepy blinked slowly, then spoke quietly. "Should go back," he said softly.

"Damn!" said Yar, about-faced, much to the Saphr's relief, and started to retrace their journey. After over twenty minutes of pregnant silence, Yar spoke.

"Tepy, how close is the water table? I mean, if we used a phaser to dig down through the cave floor - like sinking a well - could we reach it?" she asked thoughtfully.

"The tricorder is still not working. Last clear scans indicated water at about twelve feet. It could work."

Yar increased her stride. "When it comes back on line again, find the best place to try for water," she told him.

"The interference is growing worse," he muttered, looking at the instrument again.

"Worse?"

"As if the cause were not fixed, but moving toward us," he said ominously.

"Double time, Tepy," ordered Yar, the hairs on her neck standing up. A moment later another faint aftershock vibrated the ground beneath their feet.

"Agree," said Tepy fervently, and broke into a lope alongside of her.

Fifteen minutes later a second tremor dislodged loose rock and moisture from crevices. Tepy and a pale Yar both exhaled relievedly when it finished, and redoubled their pace.

The first tremor brought Worf to his feet in a rush of adrenalin. Several of the Humans hadn't even stirred from their uncomfortable slumber. The others looked to Worf with wild eyes, then embarrassment when it swiftly subsided.

Aames uncurled herself from her small niche and came to his side.

"Do you think they're all right?" she asked, without qualification.

Worf nodded without looking at her. She could almost feel the tension in his massive frame. He wanted to go and find them, to act, but an order and his Starfleet training prevented him.

"I'll go," she said softly.

"No." He said it without taking his eyes off the dark maw at the back of the cavern. Aames turned to go back to her seat. "But... thank you," he said as quietly as she had spoken earlier.

Aames looked searchingly up at the fierce profile. He had surprised her again.

"Readings, Tepy?" asked Yar as the pair doubled through the dark tunnels, sweeping with their lights as they went.

"Scrambled," he replied. "Wait. Energy reading off the scale. The pattern is too orderly." He sighed. "The reading has been overwhelmed by the interference, but it was too ordered to be a random fluctuation, or a distortion."

"A life form?" she asked, alarmed, as they rounded a sharp turn.

"One sincerely hopes not," replied the little Saphr fervently. They paused to shine their lights on a seeming dead end, actually a nasty hairpin turn. As they came out of the narrow bend, Tepr let out a purely bestial squeal of terror.

Brilliant light assaulted their eyes as an entity that seemed to fill the passage came at them, its flesh pulsating between solid matter and a horrifying translucence of flesh and blood and tissue. Tepr drew his phaser but the stun seemed to be absorbed by the light, and the Saphr was thrown several metres down the tunnel.

Almost simultaneously Yar fired her phaser on maximum stun. The near-unbearable light changed from searing white to fiery golden red as it absorbed the beam. Suddenly Yar was ensnared, raised and even as she struggled, dashed against the cave wall.

Blackness...

The second tremor woke the rest of the team. Worf leaped up from the boulder he had just made himself sit down on, strode back to the passage as if he meant to go further, then stopped.

The tremor slowly subsided.

"Shouldn't we get out of the cave, Lt. Worf? What if there's a... a stronger tremor?" asked Bartels nervously.

"Do not whimper like a dog!" It was the first time that any of them had actually heard the Klingon raise his voice in anger. There was a moment's strained silence before he spoke again. "Ensign Aames, take them outside, away from the cliffs," he ordered.

"Aye, sir," Aames said quietly.

No-one questioned her authority as she quietly reminded them to retrieve their shirts and supplies, and they made their way out of the cavern.

When the others had gone Worf was left in the dull glow of his single light, his senses cloaked by the unnerving silence that followed the tremor.

The two hours were almost up, and there was no sign of the missing pair. He stood very still as he weighed his options. His every nerve ending longed to act as his instincts told him to, but he fought them as he would have fought any enemy... and hated every minute of the battle.

Yar had ordered Worf to remain with the team. Picard had also made him responsible for their safety. He could not leave them.

Frustration and anger threatened to overwhelm the Klingon as he climbed out of the cave into a red twilight and the still-lingering heat of the day.

Tepr woke to ringing in his aural cavities and an aching body. He picked himself up painfully and with a great deal of muttering, and looked around. The tricorder lay where it had fallen, a few feet away. His phaser was gone.

He picked up his torch which was still burning where it lay on the ground, providing a muted halo of light around him. The little Saphr cast the beam apprehensively along the rough fissure, hoping his phaser would be somewhere on the rocks, and not in the hands of his attacker. Tepr's insides had curled into a painful knot of denial that stopped him from even thinking about Tasha Yar until she appeared safe and well before him.

The light flicked over the rocks, picking out tiny flashes of quartz in the volcanic slurry that had formed the floor of the fissure. When it lighted on a slumped form close to the hairpin bend Tepr's breath stopped and he made an involuntary, shocked sound.

He found a pulse at the Human's throat and breathed a sigh of relief before shifting his weight to ease the pain of forcing his battered body to crouch at her side. He did not know how to help her. That Humans damaged easily, he knew, but how to determine the extent of her injuries was beyond his ken. The tricorder was a multipurpose field unit, able to determine the presence of life forms and identify any known to the Federation but it was not a medical instrument and contained no programming for the scanning or analysis of injuries. That unit had been lost with Yar's survival pack during her abortive attempt to save Shastri.

Tepr ran his four digit hands carefully over her arms and legs, and as nearly as his Academy first aid training could tell him, found no breaks. Yar did not stir. Next he opened her soft desert tunic and carefully felt the length of her rib cage, front to back. It was more difficult to tell, but he felt certain that in at least two places the structure was not as it should be. Both were towards her back and difficult to see in the poor light when he lifted her skivvy to look for tell-tale bruising. He picked up the light and shone it directly at the areas in question. There was no doubt that there had been heavy impact at both sites. Skin had also been broken and blood had dried down her back from the damage.

Tepr sat back on his heels. He was more afraid of what he couldn't see. Another, more thorough examination of her bent head found the point of impact that had most likely knocked her out. A lump of significant size had developed behind her right ear. The Saphr flashed the light up and down the passage suddenly, checking for any sign of their attacker. The possibility of another tremor played at the back of his mind. Did he move her? What if there was damage inside, or to the back?

He removed his pack and fished out the small one-man medikit. It contained little that would help before Yar regained consciousness. Along with all the required first aid provisions, a miniature hypospray came with a cartridge of antibiotic, one with an anti-inflammatory and another pair with two different painkillers. The antibiotic, designed specifically for Saphr physiology, would most likely be toxic to Tasha. The rest were safe enough, but unnecessary until she woke.

A thought occurred to the worried little being. He carefully lifted each of Yar's eyelids and exhaled loudly when her pupils were revealed to be equal, and reactive to light. She was undisturbed by his touch.

As his mind raced with the possibilities of Yar's injuries and the danger, imminent or otherwise of the beast and of further tremors, it suddenly occurred to Tepr that Yar's phaser was also missing. He straightened painfully and moved stiffly over the area in both directions, finding no trace of the weapons. That suggested they were dealing with an intelligence, rather than the wild beast he'd taken the creature for.

He turned back to Yar and jumped with fright as the light reflected in her open eyes. His heart rate soared.

"Tepy," she said with difficulty as he came to her side. "What happened?"

Tepr breathed again. She was still alive.

"Don't you remember the creature?" he asked gently.

Her eyes closed momentarily. "Yes," she whispered. "Light, energy. So much power. Tepy, I think it was shifting... Was it shifting?"

"Shifting?"

"Phasing dimensionally," she said slowly, as if it were an effort to concentrate.

"Yes," he agreed, surprised. "That's what it was, what made it so... so terrible to the senses."

Yar nodded instinctively and screwed up her face in pain at the movement. "My head hurts, and my back," she complained.

"I know," Tepr told her. "Is anything else damaged? I have no medical scanner. Your back? Neck?"

"I... don't know." Yar slowly flexed her fingers without raising her arms, then looked down at her boots. "I can't feel my left leg," she admitted.

"I felt no break," he told her worriedly.

"It's twisted. I may be sitting on a nerve," she proposed. "What do you suppose made the creature so angry?"

"It took our weapons. Perhaps it sees us as a threat. I wonder if it dwells in this place, this time, or if it is just a visitor," speculated Tepr.

"Good question," said Yar, strain in her voice.

Tepyr put a cartridge in the little hypospray. "Painkiller, Natasha. A good one," he told her. "Your vision - clear?"

"Yes. And I don't feel nauseous, nor do I feel dizzy or overly ready to pass out - yet," she retorted weakly.

He pressured in the medication and waited for its affects to register in the pale, pinched face.

It took several minutes for the tension to go out of Yar's mouth and the strain to ease in her eyes and her brow. She closed her eyes.

"Good," he said softly and saw her mouth curve upward. "Will Worf come?" he asked.

"No. I ordered him to stay with the others. He'll hate it, but he'll wait. And when we're overdue he'll send someone, probably Shelley, to find us. Tepyr, I don't want that. She couldn't help anyway, and the creature could come back. What if Shelley's phaser draws it to her? You have to leave me. If it had wanted to kill us it could have, easily. You have to warn Worf and the others, and you've got to stay with the others so that Worf can come and get me."

"Can you be moved?" he asked unhappily.

"I think so. I can wriggle the toes of my other foot, so I don't think my spine is damaged, even though my back was killing me before the shot."

"But there is still pain?"

"The painkiller hasn't been invented yet that can mask all pain, Tepyr," she said gently. "It's at least manageable now, so don't fret on my account. Go. Get Worf before he sends one of the others. Please. I should have issued communicators. I just didn't want the others to depend on technology to keep them out of trouble," said Yar apologetically, fingering the single pin she'd brought for contact with the ship when it returned to Trobius. It was backed up by the beacons, which were effective even through electrical storms and low ion interference.

Tepyr rose reluctantly. "I don't want to leave you, Natasha," he said in a tremulous voice.

"I know," she whispered, a bright sheen of emotion glistening in her eyes. "Go."

Worf stared at the dancing flames of the fire Coulson had lit at the base of the cliffs, as if he could discover in them a way to be released from the orders and the honour that bound him, preventing him acting as a warrior should.

The night was clear and cold and the sounds of the desert hunters echoed through the damp air. Worf envied them. He checked his chronometer. The two hours were up. He looked up at the opening he had blasted in the cliff. The temptation to go himself was almost overpowering.

Another carnivore yowled its half scream, half roar, much closer to the temporary camp. Worf looked back at the others. Bartels' foot had worsened from all the work it had been forced to do. Worf suspected ligament damage or even a crack. Schober still had little strength even though the worst of his heat exhaustion had passed, and Coulson was listless and without

enthusiasm. He looked for Aames. She was standing high on one of the fallen boulders, lit only by the enormous Trobian moon, and seemingly keeping watch over them. The Ensign was the only one of them still functioning on a level Worf could truly respect.

For a time he watched her staring out into the darkness, recognising the watchspring tightness of her stance and the lone wolf mentality that had been his most of his life. A shiver of what... recognition? went down his spine.

He was about to call her down to head a search party to find Yar and Tepr when he saw her turn sharply toward the cliff and flash her hand light at the cave entrance.

Tepr staggered out into the night, and was swiftly met by both Worf and Aames. Aames helped her friend down the steep grade to the fire and the others, where he related Yar's orders and described the altercation with the unidentified entity.

Without a phaser and with Aames' spleen regarding his decision to go alone and unarmed still ringing in his ears, Worf pounded along the narrow fissure with just his light and the tricorder to go with his survival pack and phaser.

The fissure seemed to be an unending morass of twists and turns. Worf's breathing was just beginning to labour and his temper to fray when the unthinkable happened. The Klingon cursed every deity he could think of as the ground began to shake, and then accelerated over the uneven surface as it worsened. He tore around a sweeping bend and stopped as a terrible, thundering roar caught his heart in a vice like grip and squeezed it into a little ball. He watched in horror as tonnes and tonnes of rock collapsed into the fissure ahead of him. A falling rock struck his shoulder and another his forearm, sending the tricorder clattering across the cave floor, where it disappeared under the avalanche of rock. He retreated swiftly until he was completely clear of the fall.

When the choking dust had cleared enough for his light to penetrate, Worf ran forward again to try and find a way through. What he saw was an almost a solid wall of rubble. He drew his phaser and set it on maximum. For ten minutes he blasted, until became apparent that the whole fissure beyond where he was now standing, had collapsed.

"Taaa-sha!" he shouted miserably, extinguished the phaser and let it drop to his side.

Moments later a terrible, guttural cry echoed torturously through what was left of the fissure, followed soon after by the sound of a single, lonely set of footfalls pounding their way back out of the rocky tomb.

Aames and Tepr watched with growing horror as Worf emerged alone from the hole in the cliff. Despite the tremor, they had counted on Tepr's earlier experience with the aftershocks in the caverns. Now they knew that their luck had run out...

They waited for the Klingon to come to them.

When Worf reached them, Aames could see the pain in his eyes. "Put up the modules," he ordered. "We will spend the night here, and tomorrow before dawn we will march. Give Bartels more medication for his foot tonight and a painkiller before we strike camp in the morning."

Tepr searched the dark face, its ferocious visage made all the more so by the reflection of

the fire's flickering flames. "Not even to search?" he asked plaintively, unable to stop himself.

"The fissure has collapsed. Lt. Yar is dead. She could not have survived that rock fall."

"The tricorder?" asked Aames hopefully.

"Crushed by the fall," growled Worf and Tepr saw the big hands clench.

Aames swore, and heard several of the others do the same. They had all been listening to the exchange in the still silence of the Trobian night.

"I will not allow anything to happen to the rest of you. We will get to Mount Obak as soon as possible. There is a cache of supplies there, which you were not told about. It was to be a reward for reaching the mountain. First thing in the morning we will try to tap into the water table to collect enough water for the journey using your canteens and the storage bladders in your kits. It will mean added weight to be carried but that is unavoidable. Care must also be taken with rations until we find game or more edible vegetation. Now you will sleep so that you will be fit to travel tomorrow," he finished.

All the young faces that had crowded around him stood motionless, looking up at him as though he had missed something, as if he could somehow make everything right.

Somehow, Worf held on to his composure and contained the rage in his breast at their unfairness. "You have your orders," he growled. "Go."

A taut, miserable statue standing rigidly in the fire's glow, he watched them as they turned very slowly and moved back to their packs to do as they were bid.

Aames looked over her shoulder at the figure as she bent to draw the survival shelters from her kit. Her hand shook as the first one blossomed into its full shell-like form.

And when she turned back to her task, a single tear ran down the side of her nose and splashed in the red dust, where it was trodden on blindly as she reached for the next module...

For five days they trekked through the arid landscape, from two hours before sunrise until one hour before noon, and from four hours after noon until two hours after sunset. Three times Worf warded off marauding carnivores with his phaser, and several times just shining all of their lights in a beast's face was enough to halt it and either drive it away, or if it was edible, to kill it for food. The game that had not been seen during their daytime movements had now suddenly become available to them as they braved the early darkness to finish the course as quickly as possible.

Worf and Tepr instructed the others in the skinning and dressing of freshly killed game and discovered one area at least where Aames was not going to excel. The most apt pupil turned out to be the amiable Bartels, who seemed quite unintimidated by the gruesome task.

Tepr and Coulson located hard nuts and several edible tuberous roots, working solely from their combined recollections of the briefings now that there was no tricorder to depend upon. In spite of their excellent pace and success with field skills morale was desperately low. Worf made no effort to improve it, his mood almost constantly ill-tempered and his tolerance for error near zero.

"We are now three days ahead of schedule," Worf announced on the sixth night as they trudged along in the, for once, early cool of twilight. "Tonight we will camp on Mount Obak, and tomorrow we will find the supplies."

They all looked over his shoulder at the jagged outline that stood out before them in impressive relief, rising sharply from the gently rolling semi-desert of the last several days.

Aames watched as Worf lengthened his stride, and contemplated the changes in him. To the others his intimidating temperament and swift anger were a part of the Klingon's inherent strength. To Aames they were a sign of weakness. Somehow, she knew that he had allowed his pain to weave its way into his leadership.

As the only child of eminent scientist-parents, Aames had grown up alone, self sufficient and driven to succeed, as they had been before her. Emotion had always been a secondary consideration, something that cluttered the way to the achievement of goals.

Bartels limped silently at her side, a far less flippant and more focused officer than when the exercise began. Ahead, Tepr and Coulson talked quietly about plants and the practicality of making far more specific surveys of tectonic and volcanic activity prior to landing away teams on planets. They had changed too, more confident in their abilities, and far more aware of the responsibilities of rank. At the front Schober walked sullenly alongside Worf. If any of them had learned something significant about themselves it was Karl. If they survived the mission, Schober would ask for a transfer to his specialty: engineering.

A squalling cry close by shook Aames from her thoughts. She drew her phaser. It was only a roegerbok, a nasty dog-sized carnivore that normally hunted in packs and hated bright light, but they were inclined to attempt ambushes if one didn't remain alert.

It was only the slightest movement, picked up in the periphery of Aames' vision, right at the edge of the glow of their torches, and high up on a jagged crag left over by the forces that had eroded the valley they were climbing out of, that provided any warning.

Aames pushed toward the front and aimed her torch directly up at the silhouette, just as the roegerbok launched itself at the foremost body in the column.

"No-o-o!" Aames leaped forward, unable to fire her kill-set phaser for fear of hitting Worf. Her hands clasped together, she swung the full force of her extended arms into the belly of the creature as it landed on Worf's shoulders. The action staggered both, and Worf had to steady himself to bend and try to force the roegerbok off his back as it lashed out at the Human.

As Worf struggled, the others joined Aames, who was now bleeding from slashes on her arm and shoulder. Coulson and Tepr fearlessly dragged the powerful hind legs from their clawed grip on the Klingon's back as Aames beat at its head with her canteen. When he felt the back legs dislodge, Worf roared a bloodcurdling roar and gave one final, massive heave, landing the carcass on the rocks, and watching it disintegrate into its component atoms a split second later as Aames' phaser dispatched it.

Nearby several other roegerbok howled as if in dismay and moments later could be heard scrambling back into the night.

Worf straightened slowly and turned to his charges. He regarded them for a long moment, his wordless gaze speaking volumes before he turned and lifted Aames' damaged arm.

"It will need to be cleaned. You will need antibiotics to prevent infection."

Aames watched a trickle of magenta blood slide out of his sleeve and over the back of the dark hand gripping her arm. "That makes two of us, then, sir," she replied drily.

Worf looked at her, a momentary flash in his eyes at the flippancy of her response.

"Agreed," he replied unexpectedly, and let go of her arm more gingerly than he'd taken it. Aames rather suspected that it hurt him as much as it was hurting her.

In fact it required Tepr to help both of them by the time the team had stopped for the night. He had watched them march stoically, each dealing in their own way with the pain and discomfort as Worf determinedly guided the team to the final destination he had pushed them so hard to reach. By the time the modules were up, a fire built and the attendant tasks completed, Worf and Aames found themselves so stiff from their wounds and the cold of the night that Tepr had to be enlisted to help them remove their tunics and to dress the wounds. Both bore the attention with all the good grace of a wounded tiger.

Worf was still sitting rigidly by the fire, staring almost despondently into the flames, when Aames finished her picket and handed over to Schober. She hesitated before going into her module. For several seconds she absorbed the image of the Klingon, then swore softly under her breath and went to bed.

Everything was still when Worf finally rose and went to the module he was now sharing with Tepr. He nodded to Schober before stooping to go inside and took himself numbly to his bed roll.

Even the magnitude of his failure - according to his judgement - paled into insignificance alongside the pain of Tasha's loss, the agony of helplessness, and finally, grief. He hated himself, the planet, the team and even Starfleet for the necessity to do the course in the first place.

Mechanically, he rolled himself in the silver thermal sheet and closed his eyes. It did not shut out the pain, or the image of the woman whose friendship, whose presence, had become such an integral part of his existence.

Later, much later, Worf would not be able to recall exactly when he'd fallen asleep...

The room came into focus slowly. Sickbay. Quiet.

Startled, Worf sat bolt upright and moved to climb off the diagnostic bed. It was ship's night and the area was deserted. He slid down and padded across to the synthesizer, still in his desert clothes, to demand a uniform and stopped in sheer terror as a sleeping figure at Beverly Crusher's desk stirred and raised its fair head.

"Tasha?!" he bellowed, then looked around self-consciously. The figure came quickly to his side.

"Ssh. You'll wake up the whole ship. I'm sorry I wasn't there when you woke up, but you slept 'way longer than Dr. Crusher said you would."

"What is going on?" he demanded, as if he hadn't heard.

"It's a long story," she said, and there was emotion in her voice. "But it has a happy ending," she added, recognising the depth of the pain in his face.

"This is a trick!"

"No. The exercise was an illusion. The only way Captain Picard could think of to allow the exercise to proceed without putting all our lives in the danger I would have done on Trobius, was to bring Trobius to the Enterprise. Data rigged everything so that we would be transported to the holodeck instead of the planet, and that the simulation would not be compromised by anything short of the mortality failsafe."

"Shastri?"

"He's fine. Data programmed the computer to shield anyone deemed to have 'died' until they could be removed from the holodeck. Everything that happened was an extrapolation of the data collected by Sciences from the area on Trobius that I chose for the exercise, and of course the results of our own actions," she added darkly.

Worf blinked. There was still that terrible ache in his gut, the pain that couldn't be instantly undone by sleight of hand...

"I... failed you," he said painfully. "If we had been on Trobius you would be dead!"

Tasha stepped toward the Klingon. "And so would Vijay. I failed, but you proved that you would have got the others to Mt. Obak safely," she told him tremulously, paused, then went on haltingly. "You... you know, when the roof caved in, I knew I was safe, but I thought you were dead. I still have to apologise to Will Riker for all the things I... ah... said when they beamed me out."

"As I will have to when I am through with Commander Data," muttered the Klingon, the hurt still evident in his normally unreadable face.

Yar reached out and touched his hand, almost as if to prove to herself, and to him, that it wasn't all a cruel dream.

For a moment his fist clenched, and he let his head fall back. Then the big fingers were clasping hers and pulling her into a fierce, defiant embrace. One which Yar returned with equal feeling, resting her head against the powerful chest and listening to the tattoo - the angry tattoo - of his heartbeat.

Worf strove hard to contain his emotions, to restrain the magnitude of his relief, and of his gratitude for the life he held, willingly this time, in his arms.

Yar felt the Klingon's embrace tighten. She lifted her head to look up at him.

"What is it?" she asked softly.

Worf instinctively loosened his grip. "Nothing," he growled. "I - " But the words failed him.

"It's all right," Yar said softly as he clenched his teeth and looked away.

When he did not answer, she purposefully took one of the Klingon's powerful hands in hers, fitted her palm against his calloused one, and slid her fingers between his.

His head snapped back then, the despised emotion in his eyes forgotten in his surprise at the gesture, though he did not reclaim the hand. He felt Yar's nails biting into his flesh.

Worf's response was electric, his fingers curling into her palm and his senses filling with her presence. She held his gaze defiantly, steadfastly, until finally there were just two choices.

Worf loosed the bloodied hand.

Yar allowed it to drop untended to her side and rested her brow against his chest.

"What are you afraid of?" she whispered without looking up.

For a moment there was silence.

"Myself," he replied almost inaudibly.

Yar slowly drew away from the Klingon. "We are so much alike, you and I," she said softly.

Worf's eyes widened in question.

She shook her head and smiled a little. "We just are," she whispered. "The others would like to see you. The debriefing and symposium won't be until tomorrow afternoon, but they were worried about you. Your wounds were a lot worse than Shelley's."

For a brief moment their eyes locked, then Worf moved.

"Then we should go," he said simply. They started across the empty sickbay, each lost in their own thoughts. When they were almost at the doors, Worf stopped.

"Wait," he said gruffly. Yar turned to him curiously. Slowly, awkwardly, he reached out and cupped her face with uncertain hands. Yar watched silently as he struggled with the alien concept. Finally, he bent his head tentatively and brushed her lips with his, felt Tasha's response and increased the pressure of his mouth to match hers, until it was over.

Yar smiled as they parted. Worf contrived to look surlier than ever, despite the gleam in the dark eyes.

"Now we can go," he announced.

The sickbay doors opened as they turned to see Riker and Data.

"Commander Data - " Worf growled ominously, somehow shepherding the android out into the corridor with him.

"Now that's going to be an interesting conversation," grinned Riker as the doors closed.

"Not as interesting some I've had recently," Yar moved to follow the others.

"Oh?" Riker followed.

Yar looked at him sideways and smiled. "Mmmm. This survival course has taught us all some very interesting lessons..."



FULL MARKS

by

Gaile Wood

The inky black, soft velvet of space was brightened hither and yonder by the glint of topaz, sapphire, ruby, the white fire of diamonds, and through this backdrop of extraordinary beauty swept the graceful and awesome sight of the U.S.S. Enterprise, 1701-D. She was the very pinnacle of the co-operation between sentient species, and she carried a crew worthy of her magnificence.

A few light years distant from the Enterprise hung the Ark. She was filled to the brim with colonists eager to carve out a meagre existence on a new world. There were a number of different species, but the common factor between them all was the fact they had all - every man, woman, child or whatever - denounced modern civilization as the evil, festering empire it truly was. Their outspoken condemnation had gained none of them popularity on any of their native worlds, and at last they had all come together in a small fleet of generation ships to carry them far from the sphere of influence wielded by the powers of the galaxy - be they Klingon, Orion, Ferengi, Romulan or Federation.

The Ark was a mighty ship, and she carried fully five and a half thousand sentient beings. Vast hydroponic systems fed these people, and for the most part it was a happy ship. All animal life was carried in the form of fertilised ova, ready for the artificial wombs to gestate them. With so many people on board, space was at a premium. So, save for the odd family pet, there were no lesser sentients aboard.

The Captain of the Ark was Aaron Fielding. He was a big, hearty man with an equally hearty laugh which boomed loudly, often. He did not run a tight ship; it would have been against his beliefs and his nature to attempt to do so. Captain was therefore, perhaps, a misnomer, but he led the people... after a fashion.

It was only when the Ark dropped out of warp and into sublight that he acknowledged there was a problem neither he nor God could cure. The Deity seemed remarkably silent on the matter, in fact, and Fielding decided help was required. Beggars could not be choosers! He would have to request assistance from a passing ship. And, as it was Federation space they were passing through on their way to unknown climes, then the Federation it would have to be.

Captain's Log, Stardate 46533.6. Lt. Worf has pin-pointed a weak transmission from the generation ship 'Ark' in Sector 52, close to Beta 172.38.5. It is a simple request for such engineering aid as we are able to give, with as little social contact as possible.

As we are less than two days travel at Warp Six from the Ark, I have ordered Worf to signal we will be coming to their aid. An away team has been prepared, and while security would not seem to be a problem given the nature of these people, Mr. Worf will be accompanying Mr. La Forge, Data, Commander Riker and Ensigns Michaels and Hom. Mr. La Forge will

appreciate the reasons, I feel certain.

Worf boomed out over the Captain and Riker. "Approaching within visual range of the Ark now, sir."

Riker swung his chair slightly so he could better see the Security Chief and grinned. "Put her up then, Worf." As the Klingon complied, he shifted back to face the Captain, who was regarding the screen with interest. The First Officer directed his own regard at the mammoth filling the viewer.

He let out a whistle, a slow one of respect for the phenomenon the monstrous ship was. "She's a big one, Captain."

Picard tilted his head fractionally, and nodded slowly in agreement as he squinted up at the screen. Yes, Number One. Quite awe-inspiring, isn't she?" He looked thoughtful. "I recall reading she's approximately three kilometres long and one deep. I'm not certain I can recall the specific tonnage she masses, but it's somewhere in the region of -"

The Captain was interrupted by Worf at that moment. "Sir," he said, "there's an incoming message from the Ark."

"Thank you," responded Picard. "On screen, Lieutenant."

The viewscreen wavered and blinked for moment then settled into the regular features of a red-haired individual with bright, sparkingly blue eyes. His freckled features creased into an amiable, but vaguely wary smile. "Captain Picard?" he asked carefully.

"I am he," Picard answered. "And you are..." His tone invited the other man to continue.

"Aaron Fielding, Captain. Leader of the Pilgrims." Fielding chortled suddenly, surprising the bridge crew. "At least, for as long as they want me to be."

Picard rose from his seat, and smiled in greeting. "How soon can the away team beam aboard to facilitate the repairs to the Warp Drive, Leader Fielding?"

Fielding scratched his nose and looked horrified, then doubtful. He gave a sharp breath, and shook his head. "Transporters? No." Peering at Picard, Fielding shook his head even more emphatically. "I'm sorry, Captain, but I can't allow you to use those machines to transport anything or anybody here. They're the work of the Devil - a curse of technology. You'll have to use your shuttles." A thought marched over his face, and he inquired, "You do have them, don't you?"

Riker raised a brow - "the work of the Devil?" - exchanged a rapid look with Worf of disbelief, then waited for the Captain to answer that one.

Picard looked amazed that anyone - *this is going to be more difficult than I imagined*, he thought briefly, regrettably - could ask a question like that, but quickly schooled his features back to its normal impassive mask. "Yeess. Leader Fielding, we do indeed have shuttles."

The man relaxed visibly and spoke again. "I'm grateful, Captain Picard, for your assistance in our time of need -" He smiled winningly; his teeth were slightly crooked. "Praps

we'll be able to offer you something in return."

"Perhaps," echoed the Captain none too surely. He had heard the rumours about these people and the well-meaning havoc they caused whenever they came into contact with others who were unfortunate enough not to share their virulent beliefs. The time for such musing would have to be later, he reflected, and returned the smile to the Leader of the Pilgrims with all the charm he could muster. "Then if you would indicate, Leader Fielding...?"

Fielding went on. "If your away team could be at the port-side bay in thirty minutes, Captain, I'll be there to greet them, along with our specialist." He smiled, beamed out of the screen at the bridge crew. "My thanks again."

The transmission ceased and Picard turned to the Counselor who had remained silent throughout the encounter. He cocked his head at her. "Well, Deanna, I'd be interested in your reaction to Leader Fielding."

Troi raised her shoulders in a brief shrug. "No underlying tones of deceit, Captain. Nothing to tell. Aaron Fielding is honest, straightforward and quite without guile." She turned her dark eyes on Picard. "He's concerned with a minor problem involving family, and fairly concerned about the warp drive - but, apart from that, is very laid back about the whole affair."

"Hmmm," responded Picard, and regarded the Ark as she hung in the void, elephantine, vast and grey. He woke from the reverie and said, "Number One, if you'd assemble the away team in shuttle bay two?"

Riker nodded and stood, striding for the turbolift. "Worf, with me." The two of them disappeared into the lift's interior and the doors slid shut after them.

"Deanna, I'd like you to go along with Beverly and garner some more information about the Pilgrims." Picard grimaced, and stared at the Ark some more. "Ahh... Call me superstitious, but I've got a hunch something is about to happen."

Troi quirked an arched brow at him. "Empathy, sir?" she enquired with mild amusement.

Picard returned the amused look with one of his own. "No, I'm not after your job, Counselor. Let's call this a premonition - and - " he cleared his throat - "something in the records regarding the Pilgrims."

Worf and Data handled the shuttle as she flew the brief distance between the gargantuan Ark and the dwarfed Enterprise, banking neatly into the open bay doors. They cleared the holding force-field and settled the little craft to the floor. As the shuttle's engines died, Worf triggered the door seals and they opened to the well-lit, cool air of the storage bay.

The place was truly as immense as the ship it was carved out of. The ceiling stretched above them for ten metres, and settled against the bulkheads tidily were many labelled crates and containers. The personnel looked about themselves with keen interest for a few moments, and then a broad man came forward with his hand extended in greeting. Beside him was a reedy individual, as tall as Fielding was wide, with bright yellow eyes set in a round-moon face of pale ochre. Across this creature's skull were pale brown stripes which thickened as they made their wavery way down its neck.

Riker recognized Fielding immediately from the bright colour of his hair, and grasped the freely given hand with his own. "Leader," he said politely.

Fielding smiled, and shook the Commander's hand heartily. "I'm pleased to meet you, Commander." He eyed the remaining away team members with open curiosity, scratched at his nose for a second, and headed for the VISORed engineer. "And you must be the expert we so badly need." He thrust his hand out to La Forge who regarded it with surprise, then took it cautiously.

The Chief Engineer allowed the Leader to pump his arm up and down enthusiastically, finally managing to disengage from Fielding's good-natured welcome. "I'm... er... pleased to make your acquaintance too, sir."

"Don't call me sir," admonished the jovial Fielding. "Aaron will do just fine." Smiling his toothy grin still, Fielding indicated the tall alien. "This is Wrrrijagli - " he gave an apologetic grin to the alien and went on smoothly - "but it'll answer to Ija. It's our specialist on the warp drive."

"Pleased to meet you, Ija," La Forge responded and took Ija's long multi-fingered hand. It warbled a greeting at him.

"You too," it said in excellent Standard.

Fielding turned to Worf, and when the Klingon reluctantly proffered his own hand, grasped him firmly. "We don't have many Klingons on the Ark," he offered, "but we do have one or two families who would like to meet you, I'm sure."

Worf did not know what to make of this remark so he hedged his bets, and said, "Indeed?"

"Oh, yes. I'm certain they'll be delighted to get to know you." He slapped Worf on the shoulder, and turned to the other members, greeting them just as effusively.

The Security Chief managed to sidle over to where Riker was standing, and murmured, "I do not believe the Captain needs to be concerned, sir." He cast the Leader of the Pilgrims a sidelong glance, and frowned. "Fielding is perhaps a little..."

"Forceful," supplied the First Officer.

"Well..." the Klingon prevaricated. "Yes, he would seem to be rather exuberant."

The Commander regarded Worf with a certain amount of sympathy, but could see the amusing aspects of the situation. There was no doubt about it, the Security Officer was definitely uncomfortable.

Fielding finished greeting the remainder of the personnel and swept them all along with an expansive wave of his arms to the great doors set at the end of the cargo hold. They opened with a grim grinding, slowly sliding to reveal the passageway just beyond their opening maw.

In the corridor, Fielding stepped onto the moving walkway, and hunched himself into a position closely copied by Ija, a position which the away team could only regard as uncomfortable. They all followed the Leader's actions as best they could, but without assuming the posture he affected. They took the time to observe their surroundings.

The corridor was anything but bland. There were depictions of animals from many worlds, and at the edge of the walkway in rich black humus were plants in bewildering profusion. Big plants - trees in some cases - and small ones. Jewel-like, ugly, bright, dull. Green, purple, red, blue, yellow. Ones that climbed, ones that did not. And round those in bloom buzzed insects of different kinds, all busily pollinating, propagating and living.

Troi and Crusher were fascinated by the display, and peered about themselves in wonder, making little exclamations of delight when they saw a particularly beautiful specimen.

Troi could not resist it, and the words were out of her mouth before she could stop them. "Leader Fielding, the Ark is lovely. Who cares for the plants?" She moved as quickly as she could past the others to join the man.

Fielding raised his head, and inclined it at a slight angle. He stepped smartly off the walkway they at present occupied and onto another which presented itself at right angles. Lia and the away team did likewise. "You were saying..." he asked; his blue eyes were deep in thought now.

"The flowers, the plants, Leader..." she began.

Fielding's mouth curved into a gentle smile. He shook his head. "Care? For the plants?"

"Yes," Troi insisted, and gestured with her hand at the greenery around them. "Who...?"

"No-one," he replied. There was mild surprise in his voice, as if she had asked a question he did not quite understand. "Why would they need us to take care of them?"

Troi blinked, and shared a look with Riker and Worf who stood beside her. "Umm.. well... I thought they would need some help from people."

"Oh, no," Fielding said. "They are quite happy to look after themselves. We only help when it gets too crowded by transplanting some of the seedlings." He became abstracted "And sometimes pruning here and there." He wagged a finger under her nose. "You mustn't get the idea we go around doing it all the time though, miss. Dear me, no. That wouldn't do."

The Counselor lowered her startled eyebrows, and carefully felt for Fielding's emotions. He seemed perplexed by her and the others; he also seemed to consider them a challenge. She probed delicately, a tiny bit more deeply. Fielding turned his head, and tutted at her.

"Really, miss! None of that now," he admonished, and Deanna flushed with embarrassment. He turned his attention back to the walkway and his meditation.

"Deanna?" asked Riker curiously. "What happened?"

Troi got between the two big men and said, "He's - " She frowned, and shrugged slightly. "Well... I thought he was telepathic, but he doesn't seem to be now. How strange."

"Doesn't seem to be?" Worf repeated. He cast a glance at Fielding's broad back. "Counselor, what do you mean?"

She looked up at him, and frowned. "Just that, Worf. He doesn't seem to be, now."

One of Riker's brows raised itself to his hairline, and he looked over the woman's head t

Worf. "Interesting," he said. "What about Ija?"

Troi concentrated. "Hmmm... difficult." She stopped doing whatever she was doing as the alien raised its round face, rotated it through 180% and stared at her. It made a noise which may have been a laugh. "Could be," she hesitated, unsure. "No. Ija isn't either." She bit her bottom lip. "I don't believe Hnatzyi have ever rated highly in psi scores. I'm really at a loss to understand how - or what - they do." She gave Riker and Worf a helpless little shrug.

"Doesn't help us much, does it?" remarked the First Officer, and fell silent as they continued past the greenery behind Fielding and Ija.

After what seemed like an interminable length of time, the two Pilgrims sprang lightly off the walkway and headed down another corridor. This was not filled with the foliage they had become used to, but was totally utilitarian and lit brightly. The floor was bare and functional as well.

They travelled down it for a couple of hundred metres, stopping when Ija and Fielding halted. Two more large doors opened and revealed an open space, like parkland. There was grass growing and there were people moving in this vista, going about whatever it was they did. They did not seem to be doing very much - certainly there was no work going on that any of the away team could readily determine.

Fielding turned to Dr. Crusher and Troi. "If you would like to wait here, ladies, I'm certain my wife will be more than willing to help you with anything you'd like to know about us."

Crusher exchanged a quick glance with Troi. "Er... Sure - if you think so, Aaron," she responded. Troi was satisfied with the answer the Doctor gave; it served for both of them.

At their acquiescence, a woman appeared almost miraculously from the green and joined them. She was slight and blonde, a wisp of a woman, and she held by the hand two small children, one of whom was obviously her daughter, and the other, a child of another species. The Human child hid her face in the woman's skirts, and the other, who was Orion, gazed brazenly at the two women from the Enterprise.

Fielding's wife extended her hand. "I'm Jane," she said; her mouth stretched into a friendly smile as she greeted them. She peered up at Riker and Worf, who both dwarfed her, totally unfazed by the size of them. "Please, come with me to meet some of our other members. Join us for our meal. We would be honoured - " she tipped her platinum head at the men - "if you would join us later."

Riker gave her a small bow. "We'd be delighted, Jane." He turned back to Fielding and Ija. "Where's the problem, Aaron?"

Fielding held out his arm, inviting the Commander to follow, and said, "Not too far now. Just one passageway through the quarters for this section and we'll be there - "

La Forge interrupted. "Tell me, Aaron, do many people live on this level?" The engineer's voice held a faint note which his friends identified as alarm.

Data and Worf removed their tricorders and began to take readings. Data swung the instrument around the park, with the Klingon echoing his movements. They both moved off separately, watching the readings the instruments were giving carefully.

The android made his way back to the Commander with an expression of slight consternation on his face. "Sir," he said, "there are unacceptable levels of radiation in this area." He shut the tricorder with a firm snap, and tilted his head at Riker.

"Worf?" asked the First Officer.

"I concur, sir," the Klingon replied.

"However," Data continued, "the levels would not prove to be harmful unless exposure exceeded more than two and a half months."

Fielding's features registered concern. "But... we've been having problems for much longer than that."

The Enterprise personnel turned to face him, and Crusher took her mediscanner and ran it over the Leader with efficient ease. She scowled at the instrument as she checked its readings. "Well, Aaron, you've been subjected to low levels of radiation for a great deal longer than that, I think. Your body cells are showing the first signs of collapse." She reset the scanner and ran it over Jane Fielding and the two children. She looked up from her findings. "We've got to get these kids out of here and sorted before they become seriously ill."

Jane looked alarmed. "Is it very bad?"

Crusher shook her head, and put a comforting hand on the woman's arm. "No. A short course of treatment should sort them out in no time, Jane. We'll probably have to shift them to the Enterprise."

"Fraid so," agreed La Forge, with an apologetic look to the Commander. "If I'm to get this show on the road, sir, me 'n' Data'll need to get started straight away. Then we'll be able to see what else the warp drive has been throwing out, and get it fixed real quick."

Riker closed his eyes briefly, opened them and sighed. "Aaron, how many people live on this section of the ship?"

The Leader considered. "About three hundred, but not all of them live near the main drive. Only about eighty people are that close."

"Okay," said the Commander, thinking swiftly. "Bev, you and Deanna have a quick look over those people. Find out who's worst affected and get them moved to the Enterprise." He looked at Fielding again. "We'd better get to the engines straight away, sir."

Fielding and his wife managed to express concern without moving their faces from the amiable expressions they wore, and both nodded assent silently, allowing the away team to take over the affair with efficiency.

It was discovered that somewhere in the region of seventy people - adults and children - were in need of medical assistance, and Dr. Crusher and Counselor Troi arranged the rapid exodus of them forthwith to the Enterprise. The evacuation proceeded without so much as a hitch, and soon the ship was ringing with the cries of dozens of people unused to the relative sophistication of Starfleet's flagship. Relative, that is, in comparison to the Ark.

Sickbay was as busy as Beverly Crusher had ever seen it. Her staff was bustling about

from ward room to ward room with startling efficiency. Not all of the seventy affected required immediate attention - those that did being the smaller members, the children.

The kids were quiet, orderly and very well-behaved. Crusher considered this to be very strange. Most children - these ranged from about a year old to about ten or eleven - would have been asking many questions about the ship they were on, or the things being done to them... after they had got over their understandable awe, of course.

The Doctor paused in the doorway of her office and regarded the hubbub. Patting her insignia, she said, "Crusher to bridge."

Picard's voice answered her shortly. "Doctor?"

"Captain, the children seem to be responding well to treatment, except... " She trailed to a halt, and frowned, her brows drawing to a slight crease above her nose.

"Except...?" enquired the Captain, obviously interested in his C.M.O.'s dilemma.

"Well... they're not like any kids I've come across before, Jean-Luc. They're so good. I mean - " she hesitated as she tried to explain - "they just don't behave like other children. They don't mess about, or play, or read... Nothing. They do watch though."

There was a puzzled silence from the Captain as he tried to understand. It was well known on the ship that he did not have a natural affinity with children. He cleared his throat. "I'm sorry, Doctor, is that a problem?"

Crusher sighed, then gave a muted chuckle. "Take it from me, Jean-Luc, it's not normal. At least, it's not the experience I've usually had."

"Ah, I see." Picard fell silent; he did not think he saw at all, but did not want to appear too ignorant. "Er... their parents, Beverly?"

"Are doing fine as well, Captain," she replied, and ruefully reflected she need not have bothered him with what he could only regard as a triviality.

"They are aware their children are subdued?" the Captain continued, thus surprising Crusher with his insight.

"Oh, yes. *They* don't seem to think it's worth bothering about. Something about being awestruck," she said.

"Good," he replied, and went on. "Is that all, Doctor?"

Crusher sighed again. "Yes, Captain. Crusher out." She headed back into the main sickbay and approached a bed where a small Human, a boy, of about six lay with his brown eyes round as saucers.

"Hello." She smiled at him, and looked at the diagnostic panel over his head. "How are you, Larry? You feeling okay?"

The brown eyes turned in her direction, and the dark curly head followed their direction. "Yes, ma'am," he said politely, and would not be drawn further.

Crusher maternally ruffled the curls along his forehead, and stroked his cheek. "Have

you seen your mom and dad since you got here?"

Larry allowed the Doctor the contact, and regarded her cautiously. "Yes - "

Crusher cut in and finished his sentence for him. "Ma'am?"

The child did not recognise irony, and stared at her blankly. She wandered away, and looked in on a couple more of her patients, all with more or less the same response. It was puzzling, because the adults, though restrained, were far more approachable. Quite frankly, the Doctor was concerned. Absently, she scratched her arm and made a move for her office.

Captain's Log, Supplemental: Beverly's fears for the Pilgrims have not coalesced. Indeed, they have evaporated in the light of events which have revealed themselves.

Far from being awestruck...

Here Picard ceased his log, and considered his next words carefully before going on.

Far from being awestruck, they're fast becoming a damned nuisance. All, from the smallest child upwards, are involved in a crusade of some sort which is directed at my crew.

Worf is at present on the track of three children who have got out of control. Their curiosity, once roused, is insatiable. I must deal with Aaron Fielding firmly, before this whole business gets out of hand and we end up not knowing precisely whose ship this is!

Picard pursed his lips as he regarded the report which had landed on his desk no more than a few seconds ago from Geordi La Forge. He raised his eyes to glance at the Engineer, a question running over his stern features.

"Estimated time of completion, Geordi?" he asked, and sat back heavily in his chair.

From behind the desk, La Forge shifted slightly, then gave an eloquent lift of his shoulders. "I really can't offer a specific time, sir." The VISOR turned to the alien standing beside him. "Ija, here, has been helping me and Data as far as it can, but..." La Forge gave the Captain a helpless look, one which he hoped would appeal to Picard's sympathy.

The Captain ignored the appeal, and drummed his fingers rapidly on the smooth, black surface of the desk. He had had reports of the Pilgrims making strenuous efforts to - the Captain reviewed the word that popped into his head with revulsion - 'convert' his crew. His crew, goddamn it! He pressed a control on the datapad, and the information it contained rolled past his eyes. He flattened his mouth into a line.

Huffing out a breath, Picard gave his Chief Engineer a 'hard stare', and that worthy felt his guts do a familiar flip-flop of apprehension.

Oh boy, La Forge thought, here it comes. I've got to mend the warp drive and shields with a bent paper clip yesterday. He straightened to attention as he waited for Picard to speak.

"Geordi," the Captain began in his most reasonable tones, "I appreciate the effort you and your staff are putting into the repairs to the Ark's drive and shields." The voice acquired a

slightly driven edge, then he cleared his throat and went on. "However, I feel you are going to have to requisition more staff to help you speed things along." Picard hesitated. "If you need supplies, Commander, please use our own. We can always stop off at a Starbase and collect more."

La Forge licked his mouth. Picard was in one hell of a hurry to get these people off the Enterprise. Not that he could find fault with the feeling. Three days amongst the Pilgrims was enough to drive you off your trolley. Even Data was feeling the strain of the perpetual *niceness* of them all. They did not seem to have the same emotions as ordinary folk.

"Yessir," he responded without the turmoil showing on his face.

"Make it so," said Picard, and effectively dismissed the Engineer from the ready room. "Mr. La Forge - " Geordi hovered at the threshold - "would you ask Mr. Fielding to come through, please."

"Aye, sir," replied La Forge smartly and went through to the bridge with Ija close at his heels. He scratched his leg.

Aaron Fielding ambled goodnaturedly into the ready room moments later, a smile splitting his features in half. "Captain," he greeted Picard amiably, and thrust out his hand to the other man.

The Captain eyed the proffered hand, made a slight demurring noise, and waved Fielding to a seat. He seated himself at his desk and knitted his fingers together before leaning towards the Pilgrim.

"Mr. Fielding," Picard's voice was moderate, calm even, as he started to speak. "Mr. Fielding, you must take better responsibility for the behaviour of your people. They are causing disruption among my crew, which is something I cannot stand for. I therefore request, please, that you exercise some control and ask them to desist from their evangelical activities."

Fielding's face became sympathetic, understanding, and he sighed in empathy. "Ah, Captain. Would that it was in my power to help you, sir." The Pilgrim shook his riotous amber head with genuine distress. "I'm not truly a leader, Captain, you see. More of a selected spokesman... sort of." He gave a sheepish grin.

Picard closed his eyes briefly, wearily, then opened them again. "Then I must suggest, Mr. Fielding, you and your fellow Pilgrims confine yourselves to certain areas on the ship which I will select." He gave the man a glance which would have caused instantaneous combustion in one of his crew.

Fielding was utterly impervious to anything the Captain could throw at him, and smiled gamely - nicely - at him. Picard ground his teeth.

"Whatever you want, Captain Picard. I feel sure no-one wants to give offense."

Nonplussed, the Captain responded uncertainly. "Umm." He gathered his scattered thoughts which were whirling into a maelstrom, and managed to make another reply. "That's settled then, Mr. Fielding - " at the other's nod, Picard carried on - "and Worff'll see to the details."

"Yes, Captain." Fielding paused, and rummaged in one of his capacious pockets to finally remove his hand from its stygian depths with a book in his palm. "You might like to

read this." The Pilgrim turned on his heel and left the ready room, a whistle on his lips.

Picard picked up the book curiously, turned it over and read the spine. He set it down on his desk, and edged it away from him. 'A Pilgrim's Guide to Civilisation: Its Destruction of Morals, and Inherent Evils.'

The Captain continued to gaze at the book with revolted resignation, retrieved it, and headed for the recycler - the best place for such errant nonsense. Then had second thoughts. It went against the grain to destroy *any* book - even one as puerile as this - and he set it out of sight. He would just have to get used to the almost accusatory stare it gave him.

Worf growled, and crawled further into the Jeffries tube. How the hell the three Pilgrim children had escaped the jurisdiction of their parents he did not know - did not want to know - and could not care less. That it had fallen to him and his staff to try and retrieve the miscreants was something which was not improving his temper by so much as a jot.

The faint noise of a small child crying reached his ears, and he tapped his communicator impatiently.

"Worf to Grey. I have located the children. I will attempt to remove them from their hiding place."

The big Klingon crawled further along, coming to the place he had heard the kids crying. He banged his knee viscerously in the confined space, and wrenched open the small hatch with stiff fingers.

Using a few choice epithets, he reached through the aperture he had just made and could feel the stuff of a child's shirt. He grunted.

"Don't panic... er - " Worf's mind raced while he tried to remember what the children were called - "Peter." He apparently achieved some moderate success because the noise abated somewhat. "We'll soon free you." He hoped he sounded reassuring.

Removing his arm, Worf made the opening large enough to reach into the interior and rescue the three boys. None of them, once he had got them into the Jeffries tube and could get a good look at them, was older than six. The smallest, a blonde child with a runny nose, gazed at the Klingon with tangible wariness.

"You're Worf," he said; he made it sound like an accusation.

"Yes," the Security Chief replied and turned his attention to the ringleader of the group. He glowered at the lad, who probed at a nostril thoughtfully with a grimy finger.

Automatically, in a typical adult response, Worf barked, disgusted, "Don't do that!"

The boy ceased his exploratory exercise, wiped the finger along the wall after minute examination, and returned the Klingon's glare sullenly. The child announced with an air of finality. "I don't like you."

Worf scowled even harder, and thinned his mouth disapprovingly. "The feeling," he said eventually, "is mutual." He was hard-pressed not to up-end the little brat and give his backside a good walloping.

The middle child, a carrot-topped imp, hesitantly proffered a dirty hand to the Security Officer. Worf eyed it carefully before taking the small hand in his own.

"Please, sir, we're ever so sorry for the trouble we've caused - " Worf began to feel slightly mollified, and reduced the power of his stare - "and we... we... we - " the boy finished his speech in a gabbled rush - "promise never to do it again. Honest!"

Worf took a deep breath, and let it out slowly. "Good!" He cleared his throat. "Then I'll take you to sickbay." He set off with the boys travelling in front of him. While he was there he could see Doctor Crusher about this damn itch.

Sickbay is even fuller than it was, Picard mused. *Why?* He tried to track down the Doctor, and found her hard at work bending over a patient. But not, as he expected, one of the Pilgrims. It was a crew member, and he cocked an eyebrow thoughtfully in Crusher's direction as he approached.

"Beverly?" he asked, curiosity uppermost in his voice.

"Jean-Luc!" she exclaimed. "I didn't hear you come in." She gave a wry smile, a quick twist of her mouth. "As you can see, I'm a little pushed at the moment. Is there anything I can help you with, Captain?"

Picard glanced around sickbay before answering the Doctor's question. "Humm-herr." He looked embarrassed. "I've got - " his voice dropped conspiratorially - "an... er... itch."

Crusher's blue eyes became grave suddenly, but still sparkled with restrained amusement for Picard's discomfort. "You, Captain, and a third of the crew."

"What!" Picard dropped his voice when he realised it had come out as a shout. "What?" he repeated in more restrained tones.

"Oh yes, Captain. A third of the crew have come to me complaining about an itch. One, I might add, which seems to like C.M.O.'s as well." The Doctor gave a tiny twitch of her neck, placed her tricorder in a pocket, and gave her scalp a good hard rub.

"What's causing it, Beverly?" Picard took her elbow and gently propelled her to her office.

Behind closed doors, Crusher pursed her mouth and shrugged. "I don't know, Jean-Luc."

Picard was startled by the bald statement. "No idea at all?"

Crusher perched herself on the edge of her desk folding her arms under her breasts, and tipped her head down to one slim shoulder. "No."

"An allergy?" suggested Picard.

"Possibly," agreed the Doctor without elucidating further. Her slim brows drew together in a frown as she applied herself to thought. "Trouble with that is I haven't been able to isolate an allergen from anybody who's complained." She gave him a close stare. "It's also highly infectious, Jean-Luc. I've never seen anything spread so quickly - it's like a bushfire; one spark and - " She finished by expanding her hands outwards. Picard got the message.

The Captain joined her on the desk, and stared down at his booted feet. The itch was driving him up the wall. He looked up and into Beverly's face. "Is it... er... *limited* to any specific areas on the body?"

She raised an eyebrow.

Picard shifted uncomfortably. "Is it?" he insisted, a note of faint panic in his voice.

Crusher shook her head. "No. The whole body seems to be affected, but more likely where there is greater warmth and moisture."

The Captain scratched his thigh in a surreptitious gesture which he quickly repressed. "Indeed?" He went on. "Can you give me something for the itch, please, Beverly?" There was a definite plea in those accents which Crusher found irresistible.

"Nothing, so far, Jean-Luc, seems to alleviate the symptoms." She gave him a helpless expression, and rubbed her arm along the computer console. "I've tried creams, and showers, and other things, but nothing seems to help. I'm damned frustrated."

"Could this have come with the Pilgrims?" Picard asked.

"They checked out clean when they came through, except for the residual radioactive poisoning," Crusher pointed out. "I don't see how it could be."

A low growl at the door alerted them to another presence. It was Worf, and he did not look like a happy Klingon.

Embarrassed, he gave the Captain a stiff nod in greeting, and became very erect. He would have preferred to speak to Crusher in private, but... needs must. "Doctor, do you have something for a... an - " He was considerably surprised when both of them joined in in a chorus, " - for an itch?"

"No, Worf, I don't." The Doctor retrieved her tricorder and ran it over the Security Chief. "Well, at least I know it's not just limited to Humans now." She narrowed her eyes. "Could be a starting point." She grabbed Worf's arm and steered him out of the office. "Let's see if we can find anything in Klingon blood that'll give me a clue."

Worf allowed the Human woman to guide him through the doors, protesting faintly; he really did not have time for this. Couldn't the Doctor just give him something? He was a warrior. Wasn't he!?

Crusher smiled quietly at Worf, and put a tourniquet around his bicep. "Pump your fist," she instructed, and slapped at his arm to get a vein.

The Klingon obliged reluctantly, and watched as the Doctor went about her business with efficiency. He did not even feel the sample taken, nor the needle withdraw. He gazed at the pinprick in his arm and the small bead of blood which Crusher cleaned away. "Is that all?" he asked.

Crusher started putting the blood into separate test tubes, and shook them gently to ensure the anti-coagulant was evenly distributed before she returned her attention to the Klingon. "Yes," she agreed. "That's all, Worf. You can go now."

Worf frowned, then asked again. "The itch, Doctor?" He hated having to request

something for this - even to admit he could fall prey to... an itch! Would his pride live it down if this became part of ship's scuttlebutt. He cleared his throat self-consciously. "Doctor," he began diffidently, "would you... er... Would you consider -"

Only half listening, Beverly shook her head in a quick negative. "Haven't got anything to relieve the irritation, Worf." The second part of his conversation filtered through, and Crusher raised her eyes to Worf's face, and gave him a quick grin - she knew what he was going to say - then said, "Sure." She did not feel the need to add anything else.

Worf gave a mental sigh of relief. "Thank you," he responded. "May I go?"

Crusher waved him off dismissively, and spared her attention instead for the test tubes. She must get these to the lab. She became aware that the Captain was standing at her side. "Jean-Luc?"

"Absolutely nothing?" he asked again in mild tones, hiding the distress well, but also fast becoming annoyed with what seemed to be a most unusual problem.

"Nothing," she reiterated firmly. She gave a sigh as the Captain stalked out of sickbay twitching his shoulders; she felt a sympathetic spasm coming on and resisted the urge to rub her back up and down the doorpost.

It was time to get these samples to the laboratories, and hope to Hades the Haematology Department would get an answer.

Riker fidgeted in the command seat. The hot seat. Only the joke was not quite so amusing today. He could not help himself; he squirmed in an agony of resistance, a jig of sheer unadulterated misery, and watched the other members of the bridge crew performing the same version of St. Vitus's dance.

He swivelled the chair hopefully towards the sound of the turbolift doors opening, and relaxed into further distress when he saw it was only Worf. With him was Troi, and she had something in her hand which looked suspiciously like a stick - several sticks, which seemed long and suitably pointed - enough, anyway to provide some respite. The Betazoid made her way down the ramp to her chair, and silently handed the First Officer one of the sticks. She glanced up and behind her. "Worf?" she asked and made the same offer.

The Klingon eyed the object disdainfully, and refused. He did not require it. He regarded Riker, who was vigorously applying the point to his back, with slight disbelief. Faint satisfied noises reached his ears as other staff also availed themselves of the temporary remedy.

The lift doors opened again and a disgruntled Captain stamped down the ramp, eyed his bridge crew, snatched a stick from Troi and headed for his ready room. "The bridge, Number One, is yours." He stopped, and half-turned with his head over one shoulder. "And... Will, do you think you could *try* to stop doing that?"

Riker gave a quick nod, and sat back down in the command chair. "This," he announced, glaring at the unfortunate object in his hand, "is getting beyond a joke."

Worf rumbled. "If it is a joke, sir, then I cannot see the funny side of it." He glowered at an Ensign who was staring wistfully at the stick in Riker's hand. His console attracted his

attention. "Sir, Commander La Forge is sending a communication."

The First Officer managed to stop himself from twitching, and said hoarsely, "Okay, Worf. On screen."

The viewscreen flickered for a second, and the image of the Chief Engineer appeared on the screen replacing the leviathan Ark. "Commander," he acknowledged the First Officer, and tried to sneakily scratch his arm.

"You too, huh?" Riker asked, and groaned when a particularly stubborn irritation reminded him of its presence; it had been set off by observing the Engineer. Desperately, he said, "Are you nearly finished?"

Geordi grunted, which his friends took for assent, and turned his attention to his irritation. Data came and stood beside the engineer, and frowned slightly.

"Trouble?" enquired Riker, and wriggled.

"The repairs to drive and shields will be completed within the next two hours, Commander. However - " the android traded a glance with his superior, one of bemusement for the strange, inexplicable behaviour he was being surrounded with - "you would appear to have a problem which Dr. Crusher requires assistance with."

"A problem?" repeated Riker in deeply ironic tones. "What gave you that idea, Data?"

The sarcasm completely missed its target, of course, and the android simply carried on obliviously. "I have observed the crew seem to be under duress. An irritation of some sort, Commander, affecting - "

Riker held up a hand, and waved it in annoyance. He could not help it, he was thoroughly peeved. He knew it was hardly Data's fault, but the sight of his colleague, completely unaffected, set his teeth on edge. "Yeah. We know, thanks." He narrowed blue eyes, and chewed a knuckle - it itched too - before going on. "Can Geordi spare you, Data?"

Data quirked a pale brow at his friend, who managed to nod, before returning to what was taking up his attention. "Yes, sir."

"Then get yourself back over here, my friend, and to Dr. Crusher. Maybe together you'll be able to get to the bottom of this."

Crusher was reading the reports on the analysis of Worf's blood. Everything was just the way it should be, and tiredly, she rubbed her forehead, absently scratching. The action was almost unconscious now, and it annoyed her beyond belief. She sighed, and ran her eyes over the information once more - just in case she had missed something - and pursed her lips fractionally.

The Doctor slapped her insignia, and leaned back in her chair, suppressing the constant urge to attack the irritation. "Crusher to Picard."

"Beverly?" he responded.

"No luck, Jean-Luc, I'm afraid."

The silence which greeted her remark was far more eloquent than any words. "The blood sample you took from Worf...?" he trailed off, an invitation for her to continue.

"Was inconclusive, Captain. It more or less told me that he was as susceptible as Humans. I'm going through my medical records more closely and see if there's ever been a mention of something similar." She waited for the Captain to reply.

He took a few moments to think before he spoke again, then, "Fine, Doctor." There was the sound of him taking a deep breath, and huffing it out sharply. "Er... any news on the -"

"Keep scratching, Captain," she said dryly, and in commiseration.

"Thank you, Beverly. I'll keep your advice in mind. Picard out."

The Doctor returned her attention to her computer console, attacking it with sharp jabbing movements - perhaps if she concentrated really hard it would take her mind off...

"Doctor." Data's mild accents intruded into her thoughts, and she looked up into his equally mild features.

"Anything?" she asked hopefully, but none-too-certainly.

"All the results so far obtained would indicate an allergen as you first hypothesised. The object producing the reaction has not come to light, however." Data applied himself to the premise with enthusiasm; Crusher could almost see the wheels of his mind whirring round. "I believe, Doctor, we are -" he hesitated briefly - "or should be, looking for a parasite of some kind."

Crusher blinked, and widened her eyes as the implications hit her. "Computer," she commanded, "display all information on humanoid parasites. Their specifics and life cycles."

Data cocked his head and listened as the computer reeled off the information in its dulcet tones. It did not take long.

Crusher absorbed the information, and thinned her mouth as she thought some more. "Computer, reiterate information regarding lice. Hair and body lice." She settled her chin on her knuckles as the computer went through the data once more. One word stuck in her mind. *Extinct.*

Data sat opposite her, and said, "I was perhaps in error. Though the criterion do seem to fit these particular parameters."

Crusher frowned, rubbed at an arm, stopped herself with an effort of concentration, and managed to nod in full agreement with the android. "I agree, Data. Trouble is, why can't we see them?" She glanced over the desk at him. "That is, if we're right."

Data applied himself to finding more relevant information, but most external parasites did, indeed, seem to be extinct. With the advent of the medical advances prevalent on most worlds, it was only animal parasites which were still extant. None of these seemed to be in the process of adapting to the ecological niche left by the demise of their predecessors. Most Humanoids presented a barren landscape for a specialised insect such as a louse, since they had no - or little - body hair. There were exceptions of course... But, on the whole, the small beasts needed hair to survive, and hairlessness was as bad as a desert to them, presenting vast expanses of naked flesh for them to traverse. Data found the whole premise of parasitic insects

absolutely fascinating.

He was so buried in his research that he did not observe Crusher loitering over his shoulder and following the information as it flashed past as best she could. The first he realised of it was when there was an excited noise in his right ear. A long hand gripped his shoulder in a frenzy, and an equally long finger jabbed furiously at the screen.

"Go back! Go back, Data!" She was practically jumping about. He obliged. "No, no! Not that screen. The one before it... Yes, yes! That's it!" she crowed triumphantly.

The android directed his attention from the Doctor back to the small viewer in front of him. He peered at the insectoid form. Six legs set in a crab-like arrangement, with tiny pincers set on the ends of those legs - all the better for gripping hair - and biting mouth-parts.

"There is a problem, Doctor," he began, after he had made a more careful study of the creature. "There does not appear to be evidence of biting, and the adaptation of the mouth-parts of the Morritishal Louse would seem to be a fairly conclusive evidence that it feeds on blood." He briefly considered something else as it occurred to him. "Also, an allergen would -"

Crusher silenced Data with a wave of an impatient hand. She was busy flicking the computer through the information it held on the Morritishal Louse, and scowled in a thoughtful manner. "I don't know, Data. This could be it, but there's still a piece of the puzzle missing." She hurried away into the main sickbay area, and went straight over to one of the Pilgrims who was still present, the android close on her heels.

She smiled at the woman, who greeted her with a wide grin of her own. "Hello, Lisa." Crusher went on smiling. "Would you mind if I take a look in your hair?"

Lisa's reaction was unexpected; she became wary, suspicious almost, narrowing her grey eyes. "Why?"

Taken aback, Crusher said, "Is it a problem?"

The woman stared at her thoughtfully, and obviously came to a decision. She smiled. "Okay." And settled back.

Crusher turned to Data who had watched the interchange with interest, and raised a slim brow at him - a kind of 'what d'you make of that?' expression. She turned back to Lisa, and rummaged in her jacket pocket for her mediscanner and tricorder. She ran them expertly over the thick mop of dark blonde hair.

Absently, Crusher attended to an itch, and chewed the inside of her cheeks as she regarded the instruments readings. They were not registering a thing. She could not understand it at all. Her shoulders slumped fractionally, then straightened as she had a sudden revelation.

Shoving the instruments back into her pocket, the Doctor went to Lisa's head and started to peer through the thatch of hair. She thought she saw something. Did she, or was she imagining it?

"Data -" Crusher gestured to the officer to come closer - "take a look at this. Am I seeing things, or did something move in there?"

Data bent over the head of the bed, and dutifully parted Lisa's hair with his fingers. He got so low his nose was almost on the woman's scalp. Finally, he announced, "I am not certain, Doctor."

They both looked at each other.

"Aaron Fielding'll know something about this," Crusher said with absolute conviction. "I'll bet my service record and my winnings at last night's poker game." She squinted down at the Pilgrim woman, who squirmed uncomfortably under the search of those blue eyes. "I'll even eat my tricorder if I'm wrong."

Data tipped his head, and Crusher grinned at him. "Search your files," she instructed, and went on in more plaintive accents. "Would you mind... er... scratching my back, please?"

The Pilgrims 'sort of Leader was frogmarched unceremoniously onto the bridge by Worf down to the command chair where Picard was sitting.

The big Klingon gazed down at his Captain, and announced in stentorian tones, "Aaron Fielding, sir."

"Thank you, Worf," Picard said amicably, and took a second to regard the individual standing so relaxed in front of him with loathing. "Sir," he began, and waved off the fledgeling protests the man started to make. "Sir, it is my belief you know about the problem afflicting my crew." He was aware of the bridge crew pricking up their collective ears. "I want to know, Mr. Fielding, exactly what it is that's causing these symptoms." He paused for effect. "And I want to know now!"

Fielding's cherubic face acquired a pained expression, and clasped his hands together in front of his rather ample belly. "Captain Picard. May I call you Jean-Luc -"

The question never reached its conclusion as the Captain cut in. "You may not." He straightened his tunic, and looked down his aristocratic nose at the Pilgrim.

Flustered, Fielding ummed for a second, then cleared his throat. "Captain -" he regained his standing remarkably fast, and was, as normal, unflummoxed - "I've no idea what you are talking about."

Picard's eyes acquired a steely glint, and his mouth and nostrils thinned noticeably. "Really?" The eyes grew harder. "Perhaps a stay in the brig will refresh your memory. Mr. Worf, if you'll -"

Just as the Security Chief moved forward to 'escort' Fielding from the bridge, the Pilgrim wisely decided to speak. "No need, no need, Captain Picard. It would be an unwise step for you -"

"For me?!" Picard very nearly exploded - this man was unbelievable! The nerve of him!

Riker and Troi regarded their Captain anxiously. He really must be at the end of his tether to allow a show of temper.

"Sir," Riker cautioned, but Picard threw him off; Troi shook her head at the First Officer and mouthed something at him.

Riker watched her lips carefully - something about manipulating the events as they unfolded. He nodded, settling back in his chair to watch his Captain in action. A master bluffer.

"Mr. Fielding, you *will* spend some time in the brig if you don't loosen your tongue now." The effect was spoiled somewhat by an overwhelming urge to scratch, and Picard gritted his teeth. "Now!"

Fielding eyed the Klingon who was hovering over his shoulder rather like a large... well, a large Klingon. Worf had a keenly anticipatory expression fixed on his face.

"Do we do it the easy way?" Picard asked, smiling dangerously. "Or... do we do it the hard way? Your choice. You have five minutes." He sat back, crossed an ankle over one knee, and tapped his fingers on the sole of his boot.

Worf fixed his eyes somewhere in the middle of Fielding's orange skull and proceeded to bore a hole through him. Picard attacked the front.

The minutes ticked by. Fielding began to fidget, and he ran a forefinger round his suddenly constrictive collar. He started to sweat.

"Time's up," the Captain announced, and Fielding felt Worf take his arm ungentily in a vice-like grip at a slight signal from Picard.

"Let's not be hasty, Captain," Fielding stammered as he was pushed resolutely towards the turbolift. "Please, please, Captain, reconsider -"

"Are you about to give us the information we require, Mr. Fielding?" Picard did not even turn his seat; he heard the lift doors swoosh open. "Well?!" he snapped.

"No - yes - no." There was an audible sigh, and Fielding said, "As you wish, Captain."

Worf pushed the Pilgrim back down the ramp to confront the Captain again. "You'll assist Dr. Crusher?"

Fielding bowed his head in a salute. "We will assist your Doctor, Captain, in removing the friends."

"Thank you." Picard turned his attention to Worf. "Escort Mr. Fielding to sickbay. Lieutenant."

Worf gave a curt nod, and prodded the Pilgrim ahead of him.

Data worked on the tricorder as instructed by Fielding. He was interested to see that the man had acquired, with remarkable alacrity, previously unheard of knowledge. The android was aware the rapid assimilation of such skills was likely to have something to do with the rather forbidding presence of a certain Security Chief and his palpable annoyance. He was under the impression, after discourse with his Human colleagues, that Worf provided the main impetus.

He addressed the Pilgrim after a final, skilful adjustment. "Is this the last of the adjustments required, Mr. Fielding?" Data politely enquired.

Nervously, the man wetted his lips with the tip of his tongue, and gave a quick, staccato nod of his head. "Yes, yes. That should do it, Data. Why don't you try it out on - " Fielding's eyes lighted on Worf, then flicked to the equally intent Doctor standing to the rear - "Dr. Crusher."

The Doctor unfolded her arms and approached the table they were working at. She placed her hands flat on its surface and leaned towards Data. "Please," she muttered to no-one in particular, "let it work."

The tricorder hummed busily as it was passed over Crusher's head and body; Data made another minute adjustment and nodded. "The tricorder indicates there is a life form present, Doctor." He regarded the readings more carefully. "Quite fascinating," he murmured, and passed the instrument to Beverly.

"Hmm," responded Crusher, lost in thought. She glanced over at Data, and gave him a "Weelll, whaddaya know, we were right!" look. "Mr. Fielding, the Pilgrims are all infested with these parasites?"

Fielding's amiable features creased into a horrified expression. "Parasites!?" he exclaimed. He shook his head in disapproval, then wagged an admonitory finger under her nose. "These are friends," he declared with certainty.

"Friends!?" a voice growled with deep disgust; the others turned to eye Worf, who clenched his jaw and shut up.

Fielding waved his hands around in an agitated manner in an effort to punctuate his feelings. He started to talk in a hectoring tone. "Friends, of course. As Pilgrims we're committed - " he glared as he overheard a comment about 'certainly should be!' - "committed," he repeated, as if daring an interruption, "to the preservation of all... *all* life."

"Why didn't you let us know about them?" Crusher pressed; she was more than a little annoyed with the time and trouble spent being wasted. Why, the man had had the answer at his fingertips all of the damn time!

Fielding drew himself up to his full height, and managed to convey complete disappointment in her. "You would have sought the friends' extinction, and that we could not have - "

Worf cut in angrily - the humiliation of the whole affair could have been avoided! - and said, "You could have informed the Captain or Commander Riker, myself and others of the presence of - " he spat out the word distastefully - "'friends', and spared us this situation."

Fielding gave Worf a 'nice' smile - reasonable, understanding, kind - and continued as if the Klingon had not spoken, his composure completely regained. "The friends needed something different... a change in their diet, though their introduction to the crew of the Enterprise was purely accidental at first. We could not, in all conscience, deny them their needs."

Revolted, Crusher pushed her face into the man's face. "You can communicate with them?"

The Pilgrim's brows rose into his hairline. "Well," he prevaricated. "Not really *talk*." The Security Chief glowered and he speeded up his speech a fraction. "More they sort of let us know." He shrugged.

"Okay," said Crusher carefully. "Say I believe you. Just for the hell of it, Fielding, how do we get them to go?"

Fielding opened his mouth, then closed it with a snap. He shrugged again.

Crusher groaned, and perched herself on the edge of the table. She ran her hands through her auburn locks and managed a surreptitious scratch at the same time before returning her attention to the Pilgrim. "Jeez," she said in frustration. She managed to scowl at Fielding, then nodded at Worf. "Take him to the brig. That might shake up his memory."

The Klingon gave the Doctor a fierce stare. "My pleasure," he stated simply, and directed the stare at Fielding, who flinched.

Worf hustled the protesting Pilgrim towards the doors - the man gave the impression of having superglue on his soles. 'Dragging his feet' was a phrase which sprang into Data's mind, who was quietly observing the reactions of his continually perplexing colleagues.

"Let's not be hasty!" Fielding managed to shout before Worf had shuffled him completely out of sight. He straightened his clothing, brushed his dignity down and re-entered sickbay. "I... er... I *seem* to recall something."

"You don't say?" Crusher asked innocently, and tilted her head as she waited for him to continue. She tapped a booted foot impatiently on the floor.

Fielding cleared his throat. "We'll ask them," he offered.

Crusher was amazed, and slapped her communicator. "Crusher to Picard."

"Beverly?" enquired Picard's voice a moment later. There was a intense feel to the silence.

"Apparently, Captain," the Doctor allowed sarcasm to creep into her tones, "the 'friends' just need to be asked -" the silence became tangibly startled - "if you can believe that."

"Have you tried yet, Doctor?" Picard asked, finally managing to overcome the feeling that he wanted to scream.

"Not quite, Captain." The Doctor gave Fielding a mean smile - all teeth and no humour - and went on, "I think we're about to, though. Isn't that right, Mr. Fielding?" He gave her a nod, and she said, "I'll let you know how we get on. Crusher out." She held out her hand directing the Pilgrim to a chair. "Shall we start?"

Captain's Log, Stardate 46538.7: We bid farewell to the Ark and her contingent of travellers.

Picard tapped his lips and added mentally, feelingly, *Thank God for small mercies!* He continued to fill in the details of his report.

The parasites were responsible for the feelings of telepathy Counselor Troi had whilst she was on the Ark, and also were the way in which they ensured their own survival.

The Pilgrims were aware of the lice, and utilised them as a useful adjunct to life on the Ark. They also proved useful in a variety of other ways, all too tedious to go into in any depth here. See Dr. Crusher's report for further detail.

We were unable to spot them because of a handy little trick the lice had of being able to reflect themselves from their surroundings. A kind of force-field as a disguise. Yet another was the ability of the allergen to hide itself in the victim's bloodstream by disguising itself as part of the clotting mechanism. That, combined with an ability to communicate with their hosts once established make them a truly remarkable species. The only way of realising an infestation had taken place was the resultant irritation.

The Captain sighed deeply as he signed off. He had a deep feeling of satisfaction, and as he relaxed for the first time in days, absently, without thought, he scratched at his leg...



